

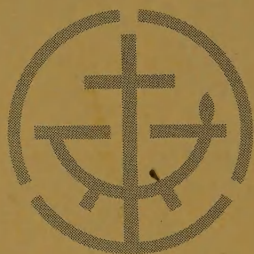
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BY

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ECCLESIASTES—THE SONG OF SOLOMON—
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ECCLESIASTES; OR, THE PREACHER.

[“This book is called in Hebrew קהלת, *Cohēleth*, after its hero, who calls himself by this name. The name occurs seven times in this book,—three times in the beginning (i. 1, 2, 12), three times at the end (xii. 8, 9, 10), and once in the middle of it (vii. 27),—and is an *appellative*, as is evident from the fact that it has *the article* in xii. 8, and more especially from its being construed with a *feminine verb* in vii. 27.”—KITTO'S *Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature*.]

Chapter i.

THE WORDS OF THE PREACHER.

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem”
(ver. 1)—

OR, The words of the great Orator, or Convener—one who calls an assembly together. This Preacher was the son of David—a man, therefore, with a great hereditary claim to attention; probably there will be music in his speech and pathos; he may have succeeded to his father's harp as well as to his father's throne. It is not often in the Bible that we are challenged to hear the words of a great man, viewed from an earthly standpoint. We are called upon to listen to prophets without ancestry, and to apostles whose genealogy was of yesterday, and whose occupation was said to be more or less servile; but in this case we are summoned to hear the words of *Cohēleth*, the son of David, a crowned and enthroned teacher of morals. He is represented as “king in Jerusalem”—a man of the highest social position. We cannot but wonder what he will say, seeing that he has only seen the upper side of life, and can have known nothing of what the poor understand by want, homelessness, and all the degradation of penury and an outcast condition. Kings must of necessity talk the language of coloured sentiment. They

may be excellent poets, but it is impossible, seeing they are ignorant of the tragedy of life, for them to speak healing words to wounded human hearts. Still, when kings speak subjects should eagerly listen. When a king has written a book it ought to be perused by subjects with the keenest interest. Anything that lessens the distance between monarchs and peoples should be welcomed as a contribution towards mutual understanding and sympathy. Perhaps the *man* will appear from under the king's robe of velvet and gold. Kings should always be encouraged to utter themselves volubly and candidly to their people, because the utterance itself is a discipline, and in speaking aloud we learn the measure and quality of our own voice. It may be quite a sophistry to imagine that silence on the part of kings is likely to produce impartiality. It may foster ignorance, it may aggravate prejudice; it certainly escapes all the conditions which accrue from open and frank conversation with all classes and conditions of men. In this verse we seem to come upon great spoil, for a king says he will speak to us, and a crowned head calls us together, that he may tell the results of his experiments in life. "Because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs." We not only have the proverbs, but the proverbist; it is no anonymous writer that asks us to pause on the road of life, but a king, grand in all kingliness, who asks us to sit down and listen to his tale of personal experience. The opportunity is a grand one, and should be seized with avidity by all earnest students.

"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (ver. 2).

"Vanity,"—a light wind, a puff, a breath that passes away instantly. This is the king's judgment! Already he begins to show that he is a man. He built his palace, but its foundations were laid in the fickle wind, and the palace itself was but a tinted dream! It is something to know the quality of the elements with which we have to deal, and the nature of the things that are round about us. A knowledge of the universal helps towards a knowledge of the particular. The climate determines the building. As men grow in the knowledge of life's tragedy, the

one thing they seem to see most clearly is life's emptiness. Time itself ceases to have volume or duration, and to be but a flying wind. "Behold, thou hast made my days as an hand-breadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity." This is the voice of another teacher not wanting in social dignity and large spiritual experience. "Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity." Thus the word "vanity" is not limited to Ecclesiastes: it is found in the Psalms, and it is found also in the Epistles, and in some of its largest meanings it is found under a great variety of expressions from end to end of the sacred books. Here we have a judgment in brief. We long to enter into some detail, if not of argument yet of illustration, especially as this is one of the short sentences which a man might utter in his haste, and speak hastily rather than critically and experimentally. Certainly our appetite is whetted by the boldness of the verdict, so much so that we cannot but wonder by what process such a conclusion has been reached. Perhaps the Preacher has been operating upon one side of life only, and has not taken in field enough for observation and judgment. Certainly if his testimony ended here it would be open to rational contention. We must ask the Preacher, therefore, to go somewhat into detail, that we may see upon what premises he has constructed so large a conclusion.

"What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (vers. 3-11).

This is the Preacher's view of life as it is commonly seen. We

are not to understand that the Preacher is stating things as they really are ; he is rather giving a view of life as it appears in passing. Some of it is, no doubt, real enough ; but whether the whole of it does not admit of elevation, and of a better use, is not the immediate question. That inquiry will come afterwards. What is life as generally viewed ? How does it strike a man whose view is shut in by the horizon ? Coheleth will relate his experience, and we shall see how far it corresponds with our own. He says that life is unprofitable in the sense of being unsatisfying. It comes to nothing. The eye and the ear want more and more. The eye takes in the whole sky at once, and could take in another and another hour by hour,—at least so it seems ; and the ear is like an open highway,—all voices pass, no music lingers so as to exclude the next appeal. In addition to all this, whatever we have in the hand melts. Gold and silver dissolve, and nought of our proud wealth remains. Much wants more, and more brings with it care and pain ; so the wheel swings endlessly, always going to bring something next time, but never bringing it. “What hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun ?” “Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread ? and your labour for that which satisfieth not ?”

Copheleth says that there is no continuance in life : “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh.” You no sooner know a man than he dies. You make your election in the human crowd, saying, My heart shall rest here ; and whilst the flush of joy is on your cheek, the loved one is caught away, like the dew of the morning. People enough, and more than enough,—crowds, throngs, whole generations, passing on as shadows pass, until death is greater than life upon the earth. The dead man’s house is always ready, and yet the earth looks as if it had never opened to receive one of its sons. It swallows up a city, and no mound tells where it slid down into the secret chambers. Coheleth saw men passing on thus, nothing remaining but the earth, and the earth getting ghastlier, because of its graves and echoes. “What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death ? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave ?”

Cohelah says that even nature itself became monotonous through its always being the same thing in the same way, as if incapable of originality and enterprise. The wind was veering, veering, veering,—spending itself in running round and round, but never getting beyond a small circuit; if it was not in the north it was in the south, or wherever it was it could be found in a moment, for it “whirleth about continually.” So with the rivers. They could make no impression upon the sea: they galloped, and surged, and foamed, being swollen by a thousand streams from the hills; and yet the sea swallowed them up in its thirst, and waited for them day by day, with room enough and to spare for all their waters. The eye, the ear, the sea, there was no possibility of satisfying,—prodigals and spendthrifts! And the sun was only a repetition, rising and going down evermore. If you have seen him one day you have seen him always; you can take his measure, and you can reckon up his rate of travel. All this soon becomes weariness; for a time it pleases mightily, but at the end of seven years it is just where it began, and will be there at the end of seven centuries. Cohelah got tired of it, and he complained. In other than a poetical sense, the sun stands still, and the moon stays, until the monotony becomes oppressive.

Cohelah further says that there is no real variety in life. “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.” Man longs for variety, and cannot secure it. The same things are done over and over again. Changes are merely accidental, not organic. A new book is little more than a new binding. We have new combinations and new appliances, but no new element or really new life. The locomotive is new as a machine; still it only gets to London or to Rome a few hours sooner than the old vehicles. It is a poor originality, or we have become so accustomed to it already that we call it slow if it loses one mile in sixty. Even the telegraph has dropped from being a miracle into being a commonplace. All things are getting to be regarded as stale and slow. New colours are only new mixtures. New fashions are only old ones modified. In short, there is nothing new under the sun. “Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath

been already of old time, which was before us." New things are promised in the apocalyptic day: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new." It will be found in the long run that the only possible newness is in character, in the motive of life and its supreme purpose. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature."

In the twelfth verse Coheleth defines his position:—"I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem." This is a great point in such a case. If a beggar offered us some opinion upon the vanity of life we should pay but little heed to his criticisms, because we might charge him with disappointment, envy, malice, chagrin, and pettiness of spirit. It is, as we have said, something to have had a king who could make experiments for us on the largest possible scale. He plunged into the water, tasted different wells, and plucked fruit from high branches as well as low, and he gives in his account of the whole.

"And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith" (ver. 13).

This verse shows us that he was no mere prodigal, but a student determined and zealous, climbing the high hills of wisdom and laying his measuring-line on the wide breadth of understanding. He wanted to know all things, and ended by knowing nothing as it really is. He found out the doctrine of the Unknowable long before our philosophers supposed themselves to have discovered it, and taught it with a plainer directness. Along with the doctrine of the Unknowable came the kindred doctrine of the Impossible:—

"That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered" (ver. 15).

What God left out man cannot put in. He may clumsily imitate it, but his imitation at its best is rude and nearly useless. Man makes hands of wax, eyes of glass, limbs of wood,—ghastly travesties of nature, and better imitations of death than of life! God leaves out genius, and men stuff their memories with the chaff of information; God leaves out poetry, and men jingle together such words as *Love* and *Dove*, *Health* and *Wealth*, *Far*

and *Star*, and sell the cracked rhyme for music; God leaves out memory, and men buy almanacs and diaries. On one side is written Unknowable, on the other is written Impossible; and man swings between the two, like a pendulum, always in procession and making one tick exactly like another. Then Coheleth rushed from wisdom to folly and made a friend of madness, thinking that the earth was bigger at night-time than in the daylight; but lo! he struck his head against great beams and lamed himself upon the sharp rocks, and found himself in the morning within an inch of unfathomable abysses! As for conquering by wisdom, he found that the end of one horizon was the beginning of another, and that when he had scaled the hills the stars were as far off as ever, laughing at his impotence and coldly telling him that there was "no thoroughfare." And in his "much wisdom" he found "much grief," and as he increased knowledge he increased sorrow! Poor soul indeed, much vexed and harassed, plagued by his own ambition, having aspiration enough to get away from the valley, yet carrying with him all up the hill the want, the pain, the fear, which dig graves everywhere and make the highest places low. Yet it is important to observe that with all this experience Coheleth never disputes the value of real wisdom, but always exhorts men to seek understanding and secure it. "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding."

So much for the case as thus far presented by Coheleth. If this is all, the best medicine for many men is suicide. If life is a case of veering, veering, of getting up only to fall down again, of eating, drinking, sleeping, and whirling round a routine course of so-called duty, of laughter without joy, and mourning without hope, the nearest way is the best, for it is simply leaping out of nothing into nothing, out of the nothing of noise and fret into the nothing of unconsciousness and annihilation. "This way out!" from your misery, your chagrin, and pain, and shame,—this way,—by rope, or steel, or river, or poisoned cup,—this way into absorption and oblivion! The omissions of this statement, regarded as a survey and report of the constitution and process of things, are most remarkable. So far as it goes the case is well stated, but as a representation of the whole idea of

life, it is simply deficient in every element of spiritual truth. It is the world seen through a dense mist; it is a world supposed to be complete in itself; in short, it is not a world as we understand it who read events in the Scriptural sense. For example, all the primary religious elements and conditions are wanting. In this rude world of Coheleth's there is no God, no altar, no revelation, no outward and upward way. It is a world of information, fact, monotonous repetition, laughter, madness, folly, and self-terminating wisdom. This, in many respects, is the key of the book. The Preacher sought to satisfy the infinite with the finite, and that is what all non-religious men are endeavouring to do. To prove the emptiness of this world is not to prove that there is no other world, but is rather to suggest the existence of some larger sphere of life and experience. Here, again, we come upon the necessity of making the old distinction between geography and astronomy. A man may seek a long time in this world before he finds the explanation of the daylight which makes it glad. The fact is that the daylight is not in the earth, but is shed upon it from higher places. So it is with the great problem of human life; its answer is not in itself, it is a revelation from above. It is easy to denounce this world by proving its emptiness, and gathering together in one great host its pains and disappointments. All that side of the case is perfectly right, and can lead to but a sorrowful conclusion: the fact to be remembered is that that view leaves out every religious element and condition, which is equal to a man proving that the earth is a scene of darkness simply because he only visits it in the gloom of midnight. Not until what we understand by the Christian religion rises upon human life do its great revelations shine upon it with all the splendour of assured hope. Where primary religious ideas are wanting, all that is helpful in a life of discipline, and all that is beautiful in moral sympathy, must be wanting also. The man who describes himself in this text, though a king, is little better than a lawless and self-indulgent child. He wants to see the rivers filling up the sea, instead of eternally falling through a sieve; he wants new toys. He becomes tired of things, and cries for something better. His world has no perspective; his world has no outlook. He does not know that there is an altar-stair leading up through the dark-

ness to other and fairer worlds. The idea of this being a school never strikes him. We are now keeping strictly within the limits of this report in so saying; what may strike him afterwards will in due time appear. Meanwhile our attention is fixed upon this survey only. He is king, he is master, he is everybody; and herein the royalty of his position was a drawback. Had he struggled his way up to the throne, as his ancestor did, he would have learned many a lesson on the rough way; but he was a great man's son, and he never spoke but in the imperative mood. A brief verb, and simple in conjugation, was Coheleth's; it had but one mood,—stern and sullen,—and it came back upon him at last as an echo that meant nothing. Whether he will become anything better as we study his book remains to be seen; in the meantime his world is small and poor. As we see the earth not by its own light, but by the light of the sun, so we are to see life not by the few sparks which may be emitted by social friction, but by the light of the world that is to come. We are to look at “things not seen,” to “endure as seeing the invisible,” to walk “in the power of an endless life.” Jacob saw the ladder rising to the sky; Stephen saw “heaven opened;” Paul said, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” As we cannot see the earth without the sun, so we cannot truly see time without eternity, or the Here without the Hereafter. We think we can, and that is our chief mistake,—a mistake out of which every other comes. The wise man will say: “This is not all; there is something beyond these shadows; there is life not yet discovered; I will no longer be a light unto myself; I will say unto the Lord, ‘Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel.’” When this is the state of mind in which the student pursues his studies, the whole scene changes, the clouds are rich with stars, and the wind is full of music.

Observe our power to make this a very little world if we please. Shut out God, deny eternity, close the Holy Book, make death the full-stop of life, and the “great globe itself” darkens into a charnel-house, and the transient beauties which pass over its surface make its dreariness only drearier. “Vanity of vanities,” saith the Convener;—“Place of service and dawn of heaven,” saith the Christian.

Chapter ii.

THE VANITY OF PLEASURE.

BY reading the two chapters together we get a good notion of Coheleth's world, and of the world which is possible to any man who has abundant leisure and plenty of money. Coheleth tried to shape out a world which would be approved by wisdom—that is, by information and understanding of things ; and he soon found that it was bounded on the one hand by the Unknowable, and on the other by the Impossible. Then he would try what money could do, and the result of his money-spending he gives in this chapter. He would not spend it in a foolish way, but lay it out to the best advantage. He would constitute himself into a kind of Board of Works, and do things on a large and commanding scale. Alongside with this he would enjoy all possible personal pleasure, and make life as far as possible at once ornamental and useful. Coheleth girds himself together for a great and final task, and the result of that task, as well as the process of its accomplishment, we have now to consider.

“I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure : and, behold, this also is vanity” (ver. 1).

Copheleth made a set business of this profit-finding. This was no hasty, ill-methodised scheme, but something done by a regular programme and carried out with systematic discipline. Other people had made snatches at pleasure and profit, and their foolish lives had been a useless game, displaying much energy and resulting in nothing ; but he determined to make a business of it, and to humble the proud and mocking world. This determination, backed by large resources, ought to end in something good, if any good was possible. Coheleth was the rich man in the Gospel before his time,—the man who said, “Soul, thou hast

much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry."

"I said of laughter, It is mad : and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom ; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life" (vers. 2, 3).

He would drink a good deal and study a good deal. He tried intoxication for the body and inspiration for the mind. "I resolved to draw my flesh with wine ;" I will not live a cold, starved, shivering life, but will deal generously with myself. "He who drinks water thinks water." I will mingle strong wine ; and as good jewels should have good setting, I will quaff the glowing liquor out of goblets gold inside and out, and chased by cunning hands. I will spur the laggardly flesh, and make it keep up in the hot race with my aspiring and persistent mind. I will give my mind to meditation, and answer the riddles which have vexed the aphorists and psalmists, the seers and sages of Israel. The king will write his proud name under every enigma, and by the breath of his genius he will dispel the cloud which settles on all human thinking. How keen was his tone ! How resolute is this kingly temper ! Judgment had been pronounced upon this process before, but the judgment might have been pronounced upon a series of accidents, rather than upon a skilfully-devised and resolutely-executed plan. The former judgment was : "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging : and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise." That judgment said, interrogatively and affirmatively : "Who hath woe ? who hath sorrow ? who hath contentions ? who hath babbling ? who hath wounds without cause ? who hath redness of eyes ? They that tarry long at the wine ; they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder." This might have been a partial judgment in the view of Coheleth. So we reason about the follies and disasters of other men : we think that if the whole matter had been planned out beforehand regularly and definitely, and if all the lines had been kept in their places, a very different issue might have been eventuated.

So Coheleth will give himself to wine and to wisdom ; he will not drink like a fool, but like a philosopher ; and at the end we shall see whether the wine or the wisdom was the stronger force.

"I made me great works ; I builded me houses ; I planted me vineyards : I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits : I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees : I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house ; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me : I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces : I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem : also my wisdom remained with me " (vers. 4-9).

Copheleth begins by driving idleness off the premises, and therein he begins wisely. No idle man can be happy. No late riser sees the beauties of the morning. The sun will not allow the dew to wait the coming of the sluggard. Industry is God's medicine, God's blessing, God's preventive of a thousand mischiefs. So Copheleth would live a busy life and make other people as busy as himself. "I made me great works ; I builded me houses ; I planted me vineyards." So the happy programme of industry unfolds its long and energetic scroll. Then see Copheleth in his sanctum with many papers before him,—plans of gardens, plans of reservoirs, plans of fountains, plans of vineyards : money no object ; distance no consideration : he will build a heaven in his own grounds, and shut out the devil with bricks well burnt and well laid. See the king "going out early in the morning from Jerusalem to the famed rocks of Etam, a fertile region delightful with paradises and running springs : thither the king in robes of white rode in his chariot, escorted by a troop of mounted archers, chosen for their youth and stature and clad in Tyrian purple, whose long hair, powdered with gold-dust, sparkled in the sun." * And away they went to find heaven, or to make it if they found it not. What could stand before them ? The greatest of kings, the strongest of archers, the fleetest of horses !—they must get all they want though they have to pluck it from the very stars, or raise it from below the bed of the rocks. "I made me gardens and

* *Josephus.*

orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits : I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees." How merrily the story runs ! There are no breaks or crooks in all the flowing strain ; there is no halting here, no limping, no failure. The story is not, "I wanted to do it ; I wished to do it ; I tried to do it ;" but "I *did* it !" I blew a blast on the king's trumpet, and people came pouring down the hills and surging up the valleys to do the king's pleasure. I touched the mountains of difficulty, and they fled away in smoke ; I stamped my foot, and rivers parted to let me through dryshod ; I waved my hand, and the threatening clouds broke up in smiles. My horses covered the whole breadth of the road, and if any man saw me coming he fled in reverence, and made haste to clear the way for the king. I was determined to make all things beautiful, to throw verdure over the bare rocks, to trim the unkempt paths, and to make¹ the earth rich with the jewellery of flowers. And lovely was Jerusalem, the city of the great king ! Silver was nothing counted of, and the cedar was more plentiful than the pine, and the air was full of odours that made men glad. Yet there was something wanting. Everything was quiet, too quiet, quiet even to sadness ; so I bethought me what was wanting, and asked the wise men to say what had been left out ; and lo ! the thing we had forgotten was music. So I gat me men singers and women singers, and musical instruments of every sort : at night the city was lulled to slumber by the tender lute, and in the morning was awakened by the clash of cymbals, and all day long the movement was rhythmic under the tone of clanging trumpets and the throb of resonant drums, lightened and vitalised by human voices full of music, rich and thrilling. The dwellers upon the mountains caught the cadence and danced with ecstasy ; yea, the enemy heard it and fled from the city of the Lord. Nor was I yet content. "Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy." Wherever there was a niche I enriched it with a statue. Wherever there was a corner I planted a tree. I caused the willing water to run everywhere to please the eye and make the hidden roots glad in the time of drought. I filled up the outline utterly to the very last point, nor did I hesitate to add gold to gold and beauty to beauty, until for richness and loveliness Jerusalem was the joy of

the whole earth. "And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen: and he had a thousand and four hundred chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen, whom he bestowed in the cities for chariots, and with the king at Jerusalem. . . . And Solomon had horses brought out of Egypt, and linen yarn." "She gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices great abundance, and precious stones: neither was there any such spice as the queen of Sheba gave king Solomon."

Now let us hear what Coheleth says of the whole mountain of his greatness.

"Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun" (ver. 11).

But nothing would have convinced him of this beforehand. Every man must do his own wickedness. Every man must break his own head. Every man must burn his own fingers. We cannot believe one another. We are told that the way of transgressors is hard, but this does not deter a solitary soul from transgression; every man thinks that it will not be hard in his particular case, just as "all men think all men mortal but themselves." What is it, then, that Coheleth contributes to human experience in this history? He shows that it is not in the power of houses, vineyards, gardens, orchards, trees, and pools of water to satisfy the heart of man. In one word, the material can never satisfy the spiritual. Build your fine houses, put on gold where you have now laid on gilt, put musical instruments in every room, make your beds of down and carpets of embroidered silk, and sit down in the midst of it on a chair of ivory, and one pang of heart-hunger will turn the whole glittering scene into ghastly mockery. You sigh for something better; for the child dead years ago; for the heart that always knew you best; for the footfall which means companionship and sympathy.

"O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!"

It is exactly at this point that the best results of science fail to touch the life of the heart. Science gets no further than Coheleth got. Science indeed would seem to be the modern Coheleth. Its programme is ample; its industry is indomitable; it spares

no money, no time, no toil. Science may say: "I made me great works; I builded me houses; I sent out my messengers afar; I searched the garden and the orchard, and dug deeply into mines far down in darkness; I chartered ships to sail in dangerous seas; I fitted out expeditions to coasts unknown, but supposed to be rich in spoil; I set men to watch the stars, to break the rocks, to study the flowers, and to pass all nature through chemic process and trial; and I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit." The heart cannot be satisfied with ashes. The mind cannot be satisfied with its own conquests. There is an aching void; there is an outgoing of desire; there is a cry of the heart which demands some better answer than its own echo.

This testimony of Coheleth should correct the discontent of men who think that if they had more they would be happier. How to eradicate this fallacy from the human heart is the great problem of all wise teachers. Man is determined to live in his circumstances and to regulate his happiness by his possessions. "They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." This is frankly admitted to be true, yet that which is admitted in theory is continually contradicted in practice: another house, and we would be satisfied; another field, and the estate would be complete, and the heart would say, This is enough; an income just doubled, and behold all would be peace and sunshine. The testimony of Coheleth is before us, and it will be read as an exercise in rhetoric, but never applied as a doctrine in practical morals. How wonderfully the testimony of the king confirms the word of Jesus Christ!—"A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." What is the supreme lesson of Christian experience as bearing upon

this matter of worldly satisfaction? It is this: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. . . . And having food and raiment let us be therewith content." "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." The testimony of Coheleth should excite the inquiry, Is there not something more—something better than we see in this world? It is worth while passing through all the painful experience of the king to have this inquiry solemnly excited in the heart. Our quest is not to end in bitterness and disappointment, but is to show that this world is not complete in itself, and that other worlds lie within the possible conquest of man. Discontent may thus be turned to spiritual advantage; when ambition is dead the spirit of prayer may begin to awaken. When all the garden shows that it is but a decorated tomb, the soul may begin to ask itself whether there is not something beyond which faith may realise, a glorious heaven which the spirit may enjoy.

Trace human life, and see how man lays down one world after another, discontented and anxious, and looking for a better portion: the infant's world of toys is soon abandoned; so is the boy's world of games, amusements, and educational preparations; so is the youth's world of plans, schemes, enterprises, and dreams of progress and wealth,—each world becomes exhausted in due time. Nothing but exhaustion will ever teach man that heaven is not on earth. He may be told this as a doctrine, and he may not intellectually dissent from the teaching, but with an incurable and unintelligible perversity he persists in digging in the earth, as if he could find some subterranean passage to celestial satisfaction and quietude. Is not our common daily life a religious parable, of which the heart should know the meaning? What is the meaning of that heart-tug? What is the meaning of that long lingering look over the hills, as if you expected an angel to appear in the solemn cloud and fill up what is wanting in life? Think! What we want is the Son of God; the comfort of God's grace; the love of God's truth; and the sweet contentment of repose on the arm that is almighty, and the love that cannot die. "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight

itself in fatness." This appeal can have no effect upon man until he has exhausted all the lower fountains and gardens of pleasure. When the younger son had spent all that he had he said he would arise and go to his father. It would appear as if we too must make away with everything we hold in possession before we can arise and claim the bread of heaven. "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich." "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." God complains of a double iniquity on the part of his chosen ones: "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." All the disappointments of life—its bitter hunger, its intolerable darkness, its inevitable grave—should drive us to seize the holy promise: "They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures." This is the great Gospel, the good tidings, the deep meaning of all that was done for the human race by the Son of God.

"And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done" (ver. 12).

The man that cometh after the king can only do what the king has done, though probably on a much meaner scale. What building can be more durable than the pyramids? What can be richer than the palaces of kings? The great thing that Coheleth did for human experience was to carry a certain line of it to its uttermost extent. Suppose a man has sailed over all seas, and made special notes and charts of his voyages; suppose the whole action to have been done by the most scientific men of the time, assisted by the finest instruments, no seaman could afford to be ignorant of the researches of such voyagings and calculations. Coheleth did something like this for mankind. He tasted every cup, and wrote a label upon each: he made money do its very uttermost, and then plainly told what that uttermost was—"vanity and vexation of spirit"! This is a great contribution to have made to human history, and if people would but believe it they would be spared infinite

trouble and disappointment. But every man thinks he can improve upon what Coheleth did; and so generation after generation goes on, and each rolls over the precipice unwarned by the one which went over last. Our irrationalism is more seen in morals than in anything else. In legislation we have precedents, and we consult them with critical care; in commerce we have authorities from whom we dissent only with extreme reluctance; so in navigation, in architecture, and many other pursuits; but in morals we run straight in the face of every precedent, and where on the moral chart there are marked rocks, shoals, or whirlpools, we take our life-vessel straight upon them, and so enlarge the grave of the fool and the suicide. Morally, man is insane. Intellectually, he may be a philosopher; morally, he is a madman. We often say of some people, Take him off his own particular line of reading or work, and he is almost contemptibly weak. This is true of the human race in a profound sense: we are clever, sharp, able, ingenious, thrifty, and successful; but let us go into the region of morals, and we seem not to know the right hand from the left. We will not believe Coheleth; otherwise we should say, It has been proved that happiness does not come as the result of mere possession; the money game has been played out, and is a failure; eating and drinking, display and recreation, merry dance and agile trick, have all passed on and left behind them nothing but sick hearts and wasted lives; bodily appetites have been sated, and the man has died under the glut of his unrestrained desires. This would be so; but instead of this every man goes over the same ground for himself, and though one sends messages from perdition to his surviving brethren, they heed not his burning words, but go to him in a gallop, laughing as they run down the steep and fall into the last abyss.

"Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness" (ver. 13).

Wisdom sees the true dimensions of things. Wisdom knows their value. Folly walks in the darkness, and stumbles step after step. Wisdom has resources of its own: it can live in the past; it can dream of the future; it can people solitude with sweet companionship, and fill the wilderness with corn, and

wine, and fruitful fields. Folly has no inner self, no music at home, no storehouse of reflection, no harp of joy. It must *go out* for everything. It pays the highest price for its immediate satisfaction, and drinks the killing liquor on the premises, without laying up aught for the days that are to come. Beautiful figure this—"as far as light excelleth darkness"! How far is that? Can we lay a measuring line on that vast space? Look at the mountains in the deepening twilight of evening: what are they but gigantic shadows? and in an hour more they will be but parts of the darkness itself. But look at them in the morning—how lofty, how solemn, how august! Look where the sun turns them into polished silver, and where the coming shadow cools and modifies the far-spreading radiance: see the bald rock at the top; the stray pine a little lower down; yonder a rill threading its timid way, and little patches of verdure here and there; birds now and lambs low down on the greener slopes, and round the whole a mighty, tender, gladdening light. This is wisdom as compared with folly. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." The light has always been claimed by the divine. "Walk as children of the day." It is promised that a time of intellectual discrimination shall come upon the Church: "Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not." The great gift of God to the Church is a gift of light: "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings." Paul said that he had been brought into a "marvellous light." It is notable that the whole inner life of man is divided into two sections only, and these are respectively described as wisdom and folly. It would seem as if there were no medium position to be occupied. The ten virgins were equally divided into wise and foolish. This principle of dual division in intellectual life and in moral character seems to run throughout the whole Biblical revelation,

Now comes a mystery which was a trouble to the mind and heart of Coheleth:—

"Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth

even to me ; and why was I then more wise ? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever ; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man ? as the fool " (vers. 15, 16).

So it would seem. There is enough in society to confound the wise man's wisdom and to trouble the good man's peace. Things are ~~not~~ all straight, and smooth, and simple, and easy. To the browsing cattle all landscapes are alike. The dog in his kennel knows not one star from another. The unconscious bird will sing in your house whether there be a child born or a child dead. But thinking man is stunned by many collisions, bewildered by many mysteries, and prayer is struck from his pleading lips by appearances which seem to say, God there is none, and righteousness is a fool's dream. The wise man dies and the fool dies, and nature makes no difference as to their burial. No angel is seen to hover over the wise man's grave more than over the fool's, and but for tolling bell and surpliced priest it might be but a beast that is laid down, and not the singing Milton or the dreaming Bunyan. And all is soon forgotten. The hot tears will evaporate, the sigh will mingle with the wind, the bent tree will straighten again when the storm ceases. This was the mystery which puzzled Coheleth and which puzzles us. The wise man and the fool die, and perhaps the fool has the better tombstone of the two. The fool leaves an estate, and the wise man leaves only an example. The fool leaves a will to be read, and the wise man leaves a character to be studied. But who cares to study it ? Who would study a character if thereby he ran the risk of missing a train ! Then this question was forced upon Coheleth : What is the good ? what is the use ? what does it all come to ? A man strives after wisdom, and dies on the doorstep of her lofty habitation. A fool runs after madness, and has a short life and a merry one. A man reads many books, studies many subjects, passes many examinations, takes many prizes, and just when he is going to reap the best results of his toil he topples into the grave, and a sod is thrown on his quiet heart. Coheleth says in effect : There is no guarantee for the wise man's life more than for the fool's. No man has a life-lease which he can count upon and force to a literal fulfilment. Uncertainty is marked upon everything, and no man knows whether he will

draw a blank or a prize from the fickle lottery. "There is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever." In all ages men have been stunned by the apparent confusion of wise and foolish which has occurred in the order and progress of divine providence. The prophet says, "The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart." The psalmist says, "For he seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others." So the confusion is not on the human side only, but on the side which we have consented to describe as divine. The mystery lies there and presses upon life with the weight of a grievous burden. It is God who smites; it is God who drives men to premature graves; it is God who has taught the mystery of death to the opening mind of childhood. Why should these things be? This question will trouble the ages until God himself shall answer it.

1

"Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity" (vers. 17-23).

The voice of a man who is utterly sated with life. He thought that something would have come of it, but nothing came. He said, "I will make these dead stones live," and behold, when his genius and art had done their utmost, the stones were but statues. He said, "I will turn this water into wine," but lo! when his magic had played its little trick, it was found that the conjuror had only changed the colour, not the quality, of the liquid. He said, "I will find heaven on earth;" and behold, after all his searching, and devising, and construction, he confessed that he had only found a grave. "Therefore," says Coheleth, "I hated life." I found, too, that I was only working

for the man who was to come after me. I was making a chair for him to sit upon, and stocking a wardrobe to clothe him with rare raiment. I could take nothing away with me. Nor is this the worst of it. I know not whether my successor will be a wise man or a fool; yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun. How can I tell what the man will do who cometh after me? He may cut down my choice trees; he may fill up the pools and destroy the fountains which sent up their sparkling dew all day long; he may turn my favourite rooms into kennels for his dogs; he may handle my most sacred relic with irreverent hands, and venture with commercial mind to set a price upon it. Oh, sad, sad! He will not consult my memory, he will not honour my name; surveying all that I have gathered together for my pleasure and enjoyment, he may call the whole the king's folly. Therefore I despaired of life, for a busy seed-time brought next to nothing of a harvest, and what little I did put into the garner I left for my unknown successor. A man writes books, and his successor sells them for waste-paper. A man plants a tree, and his successor fells it to make a gate-post. "This also is vanity and a great evil." And there is no rest. Even sleep is a species of discontentment. It is not a benediction, but a refuge; it is not peace, it is only silence. The world is a failure, and it is full of lies and mockery and sadness. We have found Moses complaining that life became too great a burden to him: "And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness." The prophet Jeremiah was overwhelmed with the same thought, asking this poignant question: "Wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?" The student has said: "In much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." The king could not sleep in his palace in the days of Daniel; even palaces cannot guarantee the sleep which God giveth to his beloved. So it must be confessed that Providence is a daily mystery, and often a daily torment, even to the most reverently studious minds. The suggestion of the whole of this contemplation of human tumult is that surely there must come a time of explanation and reconciliation.

Surely there is something beyond all this wind and rain, and all this bitterness of soul. It is impossible that such a life as ours can have been created for this end only. Reason and instinct both arise to suggest that a time of explanation is beyond, and that in immortality we shall see the full meaning of time.

"There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (ver. 24).

A short and easy rule would be, Eat it up; consume it; eat and drink to-day, and to-morrow die. This is what comes of endeavouring to fill the infinite with the finite, and to feed the soul through the medium of the body. Coheleth was perfectly right within given limits; it is because his limits were too narrow that his whole philosophy was defective, and his moral tone without spiritual dignity. Many men who are in error are not wrong for want either of intelligence or sincerity, but simply for want of enlargement of definition, and true perspective in proportion and colour. Coheleth overlooked the fact that goodness is self-rewarding. The heaven is in the action itself. Even if men were to die to-morrow, the heaven which comes of doing a good action to-day never can be taken from the honest heart. It is a profound and criminal mistake to suppose that because a man must die to-morrow he need not trouble himself to do good to-day. He who assists honest poverty, leads a blind man across a busy thoroughfare, helps a child to open the door of life and advance in honourable business, dries the tears of helpless sorrow, has a heaven in the very action itself, even supposing that death should be the end of all things, and there should be neither mourning nor joy beyond the last struggle. Then Coheleth forgot that goodness does not cease with the life of the good man. Even excluding the common interpretation of immortality, we cannot deny the immortality of holy influence shed by a lofty and noble example. When men die in the body they do not die as to recollection; their names may be inspirations in which great battles are fought, and great sacrifices endured with heroic patience. We cannot get rid of immortality in one form or another. When, by a daring imagination, we have closed the city of the New Jerusalem, destroyed its gates of pearl, silenced

its harps of gold, dried up its fountains of water, and, in short, made an end of the whole dream of the celestial world, there remains the immortality of recollection, thought, love, and grateful honour. Our contention, therefore, must always be that it is worth while to do good for its own sake, and always worth while so to live that death shall give a tenderer sanctity to every deed of our hand and every thought of our mind. Coheleth forgot, further, that results are not measurable and statable in words. Even Coheleth himself, in the midst of all his hatred of life and despair, has left the great teaching that even a king could not find satisfaction in things finite and perishing. Coheleth was impatient: he wanted things to come to hand and at once; he wanted the good man and the wise to be visibly glorified, so as to confound the fool. This is not the way of the kingdom of heaven upon earth. The kingdom of God is as a grain of mustard seed. The spiritual kingdom, once within a man, gradually educates him to see that the least things have value, and that even in things that die there are hints and seals of immortality. "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children" in the greatest sense of the word. "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee." So in our eating and drinking to-day we may add a new sensation to the feast by remembering the poor and the hungry. "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared." As to the wicked man, he studies himself alone, and is content with his own aggrandisement. Argument is lost upon him, and prayer itself is hardly heard on his behalf. "Though he heap up silver as the dust, and prepare raiment as the clay; he may prepare it, but the just shall put it on, and the innocent shall divide the silver."

Chapter iii.

THE WORKS OF THE LORD.

COHELETH saw that, notwithstanding the confusion which so broadly marked all human life, there was a partially-discovered method underlying everything. Things that seemed to come by chance really came by arrangement, and all the topsyturvy was only on the outside :—

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (ver. 11).

It is very marvellous, too, how little control man has over the coming and going of things, though he fusses and fumes as if the law were in his fingers and authority in his nod. This is God's method of keeping everything in his own hand, and yet allowing man the gratification of thinking that he has something to do with the boundaries and order of society. How to control man without submitting him to utter humiliation was God's problem, and he works it out every day. Man struts and shouts as if he were master, yet he is but a scullion in God's household, and there is more iron than glass in the window which lights his little cell. From the second to the eighth verse we have God's time-bill; indicating times of change, of direction, of progress,—and no man can touch the clock on whose lofty dial these times are marked. We have our little watches which we wind up and set as if *we* were keeping the time, forgetting in our petty self-complacency that God is timekeeper, and that his sun tells how the hour moves.

There is a time to dance as surely as there is a time to die. It is not a dial of cloud on which the hands move; it is now and again bright like the very sun. Every man dances—must dance; every man cries in bitterness of soul—must cry, for his sorrow is very great. Is it right to dance? You may as well ask, Is it

right to breathe? It is not a question of right or wrong, it is a question of necessity. Whether you will turn dancing into an art or not, please yourself, but you *must* dance when joy blows her trumpet and sunshine warms the blood. There is a time to cast away stones,—to uproot, abolish, tear down, and destroy; and there is a time to construct, to build, and to make strong. The great thing is to know the time, and to say the right word at the right moment. There is a time to dance, but he who would dance in the house of mourning is a foolish man and one not to be endured. There is a time to mourn, but he who would mourn at a wedding would be as one that shut out the sun and shortened the road to the grave. We are not to mix the seasons. We are not to pluck sour fruit for our eating. If possible, we are to meet the conditions that are around us. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." If we are not in wedding mood, then turn aside from the wedding banquet, lest a cloud fall on the bride's gladness; if we are lifted up with great joy, then escape from the path of the mourner, lest we grieve him with unseasonable mirth. "To every thing there is a season," and he is the wise man who puts away his sickle in seed-time, nor makes the wedding-bells clash when the heart is made poor by death. The turning of one season into another is often the direct work of God: "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness."

We are to understand, then, that there is a spirit of Order in creation, and that God wishes our life to be rhythmic and musical, not tumultuous and self-disappointing: a place for everything and everything in its place; a time for everything and everything done in its time. This is not mere machinery, it is not stiffness or pedantry; it is the very perfection of ease and enjoyment: it entails the least possible waste, it divides all burdens equally, it makes the wheels of life go steadily and correctly. We have lost the spirit of Order. The human race has lost its marching step, and we now go each at his own pace, wildly, confusedly, blindly. Our march is no longer a piece of music: it is an ungainly waddle; it is a jerk and rush, as if the spirit of panic had displaced the spirit of peace.

Punctuality is morality. Punctuality is not a mere excellence of habit ; it is an honest and true disposition. To be unpunctual is to take liberties with other people's rights ; it is to be selfish under pretence of being only eccentric. Again and again let us say, There is a law of time, there is a philosophy of order, there is a science of procession. All this goes down much further than it seems to go. Our habits are no longer timely and seasonable, because our hearts are no longer right with God. We cannot be right with one another until we are right with our Maker. Morality is the practical side of religion. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself." When we take our time from the Sun of Righteousness, our hands will point men to the right time of day. We must be right fundamentally before we can be right incidentally.

In this procession and reaction of times and seasons, Coheleth saw that he was the truly wise man who enjoyed the day that was passing over him :—

"Every man should . . . enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God" (ver. 13).

Try to find the sweetness that is in your food. Do not eat as mere animals, but eat and drink sacramentally. "It is the gift of God." Do not put off your enjoyments, but realise them now. You are going to be a happy man in some far off future ; why not be happy at this very moment ? Instead of merely going to heaven as a distant and unknown land, begin your heavenly enjoyment and service now. Do not waste the sunshine. It was meant to make glad, therefore be glad, and quote the sunlight as authority and justification. But there is trouble in your heart, you say, and you cannot be glad. Such a condition of life must always be broadly and sympathetically recognised. Give that trouble its right name, and you will find that its name is *Sin*. You know the mighty power of sin over human life : it frightens away the birds of paradise ; it scares the angels of God ; it calls together the wandering clouds, and forms them into one intense and infinitely awful storm ; it drops poison into the choicest wine ; it starts up like a spirit in the darkness of the bad man's chamber, and shakes that darkness as if it were a

curtain, and fills the air with a ghostly noise. Sin is a shadow that kills the flowers; it is a spectral hand on the gilded and pictured wall; it is a tug in the crowd; it is a mocking laugh in the churchyard; it is a touch of fire;—it is hell! No wonder, then, that men cannot enjoy the day as it passes over them, and that though they rise to conquer in the morning, they fall back at night with arrows quivering and rankling in their hearts. All order, all rhythm, all proportion, must go down before the destructive influence of sin. This is true in the individual character, and true in all social and national relations. There can be no peace on the surface until there is rest at the heart. Come, thou Saviour of the world, and bruise the head of the cruel serpent! Thou only canst work this great miracle of reconciliation, and the recall and re-establishment of order. All things are out of course: the foundations are shaken, the corner-stones are displaced, and utterest confusion reigns. Come, thou Spirit of peace, walk over the troubled sea of our storm-tossed ship, and bring to us the joy and the hope of a great calm!

Coheleth well says that there is a secret in the works of God:—

“No man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end” (ver. 11).

No man can find out the secret of things. God allows man wide liberties and privileges, but he keeps back one key which never passes into mortal hands. “The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.” “Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.” You work your way down to the molecule, but what is it? Who made it? You dissect and analyse and test by steel and fire, but what is that which escapes you at the last? It hovers above you, it glances at you, it thrills you; what is it? Lo! no man can catch that subtle thing and make it give up its secret. We have read many pages, yet we cannot finish the book. There is one chapter wanting, perhaps only a paragraph, perhaps only ■

word ; but it is wanting ! So again and again we come upon the inquiry just quoted—"Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection ?" Rightly understood, it is this missing Secret which keeps the world moving. We think we can get at it if we travel faster, so we mount the quickest runner and fly after the Secret ; and lo ! when we come to the journey's end, we find we have been set down nowhere, and there is no way back again ! We think we might telegraph for it, and we telegraph, but no one answers us from the other end, except a man who knows nothing and can tell nothing ! We may get it, though, if we bore a tunnel under the sea ; and behold, when we get a mile on the road we are choked and stifled, and the depth says, It is not in me. Still that Secret keeps the world in perpetual movement. We should sink into somnolence if it were not for a Voice in the wind that says, Try again, you may find me next time. Find the echo ! Find the starting-point of the wind ! When you have found these you will be as far from God as ever. And yet he is always looking on, always feeding us, always holding us up in his arms. "In him we live and move and have our being."

Of God, it may be said—

"He hath made every thing beautiful in his time" (ver. 11) ;

nothing can be put to it nor anything taken from it. We seem to love each of the seasons best as it comes round. Even winter touches our imagination, and makes our tongue eloquent in its praise. How pure the white scarf thrown round the shoulders of the mountains ! With what infinite delicacy does the snow alight on the tender twig, and with what amazing minuteness is a great landscape, with its rocks, its ravines, its deep caves, its countless trees, crystallised on a window-pane ! Then comes the jocund spring : the round-faced, laughing child, dimpled all over, rosy, sparkling, full of life ; and how childlike its first efforts,—the violet, the primrose, the white-faced daisy ; then the fuller flowers, then the flowers fuller still, deepening in colour, as the fire increases in intensity. Then summer, a maiden of infinite grace, charming, musical, hospitable, most tender, most helpful. And as for autumn—thrifty old mother, storing for us, giving us

golden grain, and mellow fruit, and juicy wine, with her low, gentle, rich voice telling us to gather whilst we may. "Every thing beautiful in his time"!—morning beautiful, and midday, and tender evening, and starry night glittering with jewels which no thief can steal. "Every thing beautiful in his time"!—childhood beautiful, and youth, and strong manhood, and green old age! And who can gild God's refined gold? Who can add a brighter line to the rainbow? Who can burnish the morning star? Who can paint the lily, or give the rose a tenderer blush, or give the sky a bolder arch? Thus, from the things that are round about us, it is not difficult to argue our way to higher thoughts and vaster possibilities. As everything within our vision has been made beautiful in his time, why should there not be an all-crowning heaven, exactly such as is described by poets and seers in Biblical books? The things that are beautiful were given to us that from the known we might argue the unknown, and from the unformed rock infer the massive and sculptured temple and home. There is a testimony of natural theology. Out of the very stones we may raise up children unto Abraham. Order, punctuality, beauty, perfection; all these we find in the outworking of what is called natural law, and in their outworking we are to see at least the possibility of life on a larger scale, a more exquisite beauty, a more perfect timeliness—yea, the very heaven and rest of God.

"And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work" (vers. 16, 17).

Among all the sights that Coheleth saw there was none so discouraging and saddening as this,—wickedness in the place of judgment! When the lips of the judge are sealed by flattery, and the hand of the executioner is stayed by a bribe, what is the security of life? The testimony of Coheleth goes directly to an error which appears to have taken hold of our own times; we seem to think that ignorance is the parent of all crime, and that to live in a poor neighbourhood is to have poor morals. The poor and the untaught have to bear many an unreasonable and unjust reflection. It would not be difficult to show that the crimes of the ignorant are not to be mentioned with the crimes of

the instructed, for turpitude and for range of mischievous influence. Look at the law reports of any civilised country: who are the criminals? The men who cannot read and write may have committed many petty misdemeanours, but it will be found that it is the educated and the gifted who have done most to bring dishonour upon civilisation, and to threaten society with insecurity and ultimate ruin. Are they the crimes of the poor and the ignorant that stain the pages of history? How are political intrigues conducted? Who arranges all the network of statecraft? How are wars plotted, and how is oppression carried out? By the poor, the unlettered, the pickpocket? Such an inquiry needs no reply in words. We know that perverted education, and misdirected shrewdness, and calculating self-regard can do more in the way of troubling and degrading nations than can be done by poverty, illiterateness, and the desperation of weakness. Let us therefore understand that sinfulness is not peculiar to any class. It is not a class question at all; it is human nature that has fallen, and not some particular men representing an exclusive class.

In the seventeenth verse *Cohemoth* shows a manifestation of what may be called natural religion. His better instincts now come to his aid, and he says in his heart,

"God shall judge the righteous and the wicked."

Even the man who does not formally and professedly believe in God feels in his heart of hearts that there must be a last appeal to him. When man is true to his instincts and intuitions he sends out a cry to the living God in the day of sore trouble and utter helplessness. Human nature does not disclose itself wholly and absolutely under ordinary circumstances. The man who will quietly ignore the existence of God will call out for him when trouble darkens the window, and when the rock melts into a bog under his uncertain feet. We all are aware of circumstances which almost necessitate the existence and beneficent rule of God. When we see the strong oppressing the weak, and the rich tormenting the poor, and the bad man throwing down all signs of virtue, we feel within us a testimony which we cannot repress to the existence of an Authority which must ultimately put down all such crime. Under such circumstances the heart tells its own

tale. This is one good that comes out of the very wickedness of human nature. In a state of average respectability and decency, the very idea of God might drop out of human thinking. With excellent health, plentiful income, happy families, who would care for God? It is when life reaches the tragic point that men cry out for the living Father. The same is true on the better side of our nature. In our highest moments we think of God. When the soul is inflamed with pure love, and life is lifted far beyond the seductions and mockeries of earth, God is our supreme joy, and he is our infinite satisfaction. It is the middle or commonplace line of life that is full of danger. It is in the lull that our sails cling to the mast. We need to be shaken, roused, scourged! Herein it is true to say of man, "Cry aloud, for he has a God!" In the Cross of Christ all this is made to appear in its right light. There we find the throne of judgment, and every man standing before it, giving an account of himself unto God. What is begun in the Old Testament is completed in the New. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad."

"I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?" (vers. 18-21).

The psalmist says, "I was as a beast before thee." Our life is so short and our vision so dim and contracted that we are comparatively as little able to measure the scope of God's government as are the beasts which perish. The circle is so vast that any line we can lay upon it appears to be straight. Is it not even so with the earth itself? Who can see where the line curves? You think it curves at yonder point; go to it, and you will find it stretches away as direct and unbent as before. We mistake the part for the whole. We sit in our little village, and think it is the whole universe. We miss the philosophy of proportion and relationship. Given a circle of half an inch in diameter, and the glow-worm is a great sun; a circle of a foot in

diameter, and the candle is a blazing planet ; a circle of fifty feet radius, and the candle is barely visible. It is so with the two periods which we know as Here and Hereafter—with time and eternity. When we stand at the foot of the mountain the mighty hill rises right away to the clouds—huge, solemn, over-towering ; at a distance of half a mile that same mountain is robbed of its magnificence ; or, viewed from the summit of another hill, it becomes but a gentle slope. One day we shall see it so with earth itself : what is now great to us will become little, and what is now distant and speculative will become the eternal and satisfying reality. Why are we not convinced by what is patent to our own observation ? Give a religious application to these things that are earthly, and you will see life in its proper measure and relationship. Viewed within narrow limits there seems to be no difference between the death of a man and the death of a beast : they breathe the same air, they are warmed by the same sun, they are buried in the same earth. Yet there is something in us, apart from revelation, which tells us that the spirit of man goeth upward. You *know* that the child does not die as the dog. Perhaps you cannot explain why ; but who can explain the deepest things and the highest ? Your own consciousness, especially in its highest moods, is a perpetual mystery. We know many things for which there are no words ; even the words we use have meanings much beyond the letter. We know otherwise than intellectually that there is something in us that death cannot quench—

“Else whence this pleasing hope,
This fond desire, this lingering after immortality?”

A certain part of the way we undoubtedly go side by side with the beast : we are flesh and blood, we eat and drink, we live on the same earth ; yet there is a point of departure at which man leaves the beast at an infinite distance—even the poorest and commonest men ; man thinks, plans, advances, reads, writes, speculates ; and as here and now there is so great and manifest a distance, it is simply impossible that beast and man can be one at death, except in the mere act of physically expiring. There is some difference between an exhausted candle and a setting sun ; there is some difference between the rotting wood and the

slumbering root. So there is some difference between the breath that is in the nostrils and the inspiration that moves and elevates the soul.

"Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?" (ver. 22).

THIS Coheleth comes back to self-enjoyment. Eat the grapes as you grow them; put nothing into the earth that you cannot eat in your own lifetime. Oh, foolish wisdom! Give to the poor if you would be rich; leave something for the gleaners if you would have plenty for yourself. "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord." Said one Christian philanthropist who took the right measure of things, "I have nothing but that which I have given away." The Book of Ecclesiastes is best interpreted by the teaching of Jesus Christ. Immediately after reading this book read the Sermon on the Mount, and all its narrow philosophy and contracted outlook will be counteracted as to their vicious influence. We feel in listening to Coheleth that we are listening to a man who has seen one world only, and who is measuring all things by its standards and customs. He is only good so far as he goes. We have to take him with innumerable qualifications and drawbacks. When we peruse the Sermon on the Mount from end to end, and see what Jesus Christ's conception of man really is, and what is the relation in which he sets man to God and God to man—how he holds time in contempt, as a thing that is self-contained, and regards it as of value only as it bears upon the unseen and the eternal, we instinctively and gratefully exclaim, "A greater than Solomon is here!"

Chapter iv.

A WISE LESSON.

"So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun : and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter ; and on the side of their oppressors there was power ; but they had no comforter " (ver. 1).

COHELETH appears in this, as in other verses, as a sympathetic man. There is the making of a true philosopher in him, in so far as he observes widely and clearly, though he does not always seem to draw the right conclusion from what he sees. It is very beautiful and instructive to notice how broad are his sympathies and how deep is his interest in human life. We seem to determine for ourselves the size of the world in which we live : if we dwell upon our own little case alone the world is very small ; if we look upon the lot of others, and consider their burdens, their tears, their labours, and their joys, the world widens under our sympathetic eyes. In Coheleth's own palace and immediate surroundings there was no want of radiance, of music, or of comforts that satisfy the lowest desires ; yet he never feared to look out of his well-draped window, and across his terraces ablaze with glowing flowers, and to sympathise with the distresses of his fellow-men. As a philosopher he could not live within the enclosure of his own walls, and satisfy himself with the odours of his own fragrant gardens. He had great human sympathies, great natural curiosity about events, and great interest in human condition and progress. There are natures that can insulate themselves, and live upon the small island of their own affairs ; and there are hearts that have room enough for the distant, the poor, and the sad.

There is no need that we should believe all Coheleth's conclusions and opinions. We listen to them respectfully, as to any

shrewd man's graphic and vivid talk, but not until we have seen how they compare with the teaching of Jesus Christ are we to commit ourselves to his theories and decisions. There is no full-stop in the Old Testament as to moral teaching and moral responsibility. Forgetfulness of this circumstance has led to the adoption of many narrow conclusions in practical theology. We must go back to the right theory of punctuation, and that will teach us that in the Old Testament there is no full-stop; whatever is there points onward to its completion in the New Testament, and to that New Testament every appeal must be made for final decision. Very often Coheleth talks diamonds, and sometimes he talks plain glass. Now and again, and indeed frequently, there issues from his lips a strain of genuine music, fresh as the south-west wind in which the thrush sings; and sometimes his voice is muffled and hoarse, like a common man's. We must not stop him either here or there. The testimony must be studied as a whole, so far as any one man can supply such a testimony, and then it must be taken to the court of Jesus Christ for adjustment and final acceptance.

In this first verse Coheleth gives us a good and wise lesson, to the effect that we are to live as citizens of the whole world, and not as tenants of any particular corner of it. Coheleth seems to say: Do not be narrow in your survey, or short in your outlook; do not be Britons only, or Gauls, or Jews—be philanthropists; whatever concerns *man* should concern all men. The slaves that Livingstone saw in the African woods are our brothers. The big, brawny, strong men, with the so-called slave-taming sticks crippling their limbs and burdening their necks like galling yokes, with the demon-hearted mocking Arab smiting them with a hatchet or threatening them with a musket—these men cry out for help, and shame be on the land which allows their cry to pass over it like a voiceless wind. Brotherhood is not a question of geography. Philanthropy is not bounded by latitude and longitude. We hold our liberty that we may give it to other men who need it; and our strength we hold in trust on behalf of those who cannot lift an arm in their own defence. We mourn our little inconveniences, and magnify the trivialities of our daily life, until we think ourselves ill-used; but if we would look farther

and take in a wider horizon of human life we might blush for shame that we murmur over trifles when other men groan under intolerable disasters. Consider all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold the tears of such as have no comforter, if you would see the pettiness of your own frets, and the magnificence of your own mercies.

If Coheleth was so benevolent and sympathetic, what ought we to be who live under the inspiration of One greater than Solomon? "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Old boundaries are thus thrown down; old gates and bars are removed with a mighty hand, and a great tide of Gospel blessing rolls round the whole world, leaving no one spot unfertilised or unblessed. If we would add richest luxury to our own banquet, we must send a portion to the poor, and if we would know how rich we are, and free, and mighty, we should go and exchange places for a time with the oppressed and the sore in heart.

"Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun" (vers. 2, 3).

Surely we did well to say that we would not commit ourselves to all Coheleth's theories and decisions. Here is a case in point. In the first verse Coheleth shines as a philanthropist; in the second verse he dwindles into a narrow-minded judge. In the first verse he is a statesman, in the second he is only a politician. Because of the shadow, and the wrinkle, and the pain, and the crookedness, he says that the dead are more to be praised than the living, and the unborn than those who are alive. If this world were all, there are some cases of distress which would go far towards supporting Coheleth's view. Undoubtedly there are people to whom life is a burden, and who sigh for relief from their pain and weariness. But who would judge the process without waiting for the result? "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die." Christianity gives the right tone to all thinking about human distress and weakness. "We know that all things work together for good to them that

love God." "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." Thus all our little theories are swallowed up in a divine philosophy, and in the midst of our tumult and unbelief we are simply called upon to let patience have her perfect work. The wicked man brings his punishment upon himself; and though there are some whose wickedness is not clearly established who suffer much, they cannot separate themselves from the great social mass of which they are a part, nor can they escape the law which operates impartially alike in its collateral inflictions and blessings. We must not charge God with having made a mistake in creating the world. We do not yet see the whole purpose of his scheme. Nor do we know all the rich compensations by which our life is redeemed from despair. The loneliest heart has its own faint ray of light; the saddest soul knows one flower from which it can extract honey. Even the slave has his broad glad laugh, as if he had thrown away his chain. We know not what angels go to the dungeon, and what sweetness is dropped into cups that seem to be full of wormwood.

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense."

Do not pity the earth when winter chills it with infinite cold and locks up its streams and fountains; it is giving its beloved sleep, and by-and-by hills and valleys now sheeted with snow shall awake to put on garments of beauty. We do not deny that there are hard cases in the world. Society is full of difficult problems, and is itself the most difficult problem of all. The web of life is torn by fierce hands that would spoil the pattern of God. Black spirits of desperate strength and implacable temper poison the streams the very moment they spring from the fountain, and we wonder why God permits them to live. As Christians we know this, we feel it; but we wait. The Lord takes an infinite breadth of work before him, and we will not judge his strange way until he bids us look from the height of Zion upon all the road through which he has made us to pass. Were we to give license to our foolish tongues, how great and severe would be the impeachment which we could urge against the government of God! What mysteries have to be cleared up! What wrongs have to be avenged! What a mighty wind

has to pass through all the channels of pestilence to blow off the malaria of sickness and death! But God will surely do it all. A fire goeth before him, and a great wind, and his chariots fill the sky, and his angels are an armed host. "O rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him!" Do not be rash with God. Say not that death is better than life, lest you sacrifice an eternal truth to a fleeting and deceptive appearance. The terms *Life* and *Death* should indeed be employed cautiously. Who knows what *Life* is? Who can define with any approach to exhaustiveness the ghastly term *Death*? When we say *Life*, it is impossible we can mean it all, because we do not know its whole scope; we can therefore but mean a part of it, an appearance, a transient flash. When we say *Death*, we can only mean some hint of it, a passing shadow, a dark spectre, a chilling wind; *Death* in its completeness and reality is a term which it is impossible for us to realise or define.

"Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit" (ver. 4).

Here Coheleth comes upon another difficulty. He says that even where a man does that which is right, and turns life into a success, he only excites the envy and rivalry of the people who are around him. If he succeeds in business he will be called pushing, self-seeking, and boastful; if he gets into high office critics will say it was through audacity, scheming, or favouritism; if he gives large sums of money, people will say that it was through pride and to have his name published. This is the continual law of society. Social criticism has been urged into an exaggerated influence: men have become slaves one of another: the bravest wonders what the next bravest will think of him. This may be denied in words, or may be exploded as a theory, but who has not felt the subtle influence of this temptation upon the heart? A man works with almost desperate energy, he submits to all the agony of self-sacrifice, he turns the night into day that he may prolong his labours; and when he has reached the goal of his ambition there are not wanting people who can describe him as a "fortunate man,"—that is to say, they look upon him as one who is a favourite of Fortune, and do not ascribe his honour or success to an obvious process of toil, and sacrifice,

and earnest calculation of causes and effects. Another man folds his arms, dreams away all his possibilities, allows his energies to fall into desuetude, comforts himself with the fool's philosophy that all things come to him who waits, and when nothing does come to him, he turns round and looks upon the successful man with a jaundiced eye, encounters him with the spite of envy, traduces him to his brethren, or flippantly describes him as a favourite of Fortune. We are to work diligently for the sake of the work itself, and to trust that a good seed-time will bring a good harvest. We cannot follow our labours beyond a given point; having done what we can we may let our tired hands drop by our sides whilst we await the issue in confident patience.

Cohelah now turns to see another side of human life, and this is his account of it :—

"The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit" (vers. 5, 6).

The fool does not aim at success, and so he excites nobody's envy. He lives from hand to mouth; he simply wants to be let alone. A very graphic representation is given of him in the fifth verse :—"The fool . . . eateth his own flesh," that is to say, he eats his capital, he lives upon the dowry without putting it out to usury. Give him seed for his fields, and he will live upon the seed without sowing it, and in doing so he quotes a proverb, saying, "Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit." This a wise proverb quoted by a foolish person, and therefore robbed of all its deep, rich meaning. So we are quoting proverbs to-day without knowing what we are talking about. So, too, we quote texts of Scripture, and misquote them. We forget that the word of God is a two-edged sword; and that in cutting others we bring the back stroke upon ourselves. A sad thing is this, a wise word on the lips of a fool: "A jewel in a swine's snout"! Sad and even heart-breaking to a great teacher or a deep student to hear ignorant people turning great texts to small meanings; putting up their cattle in the sanctuary, and turning holy places into dens of thieves. Think of a little sectarian eating up all the rich corn of Scripture, and growing neither larger nor fairer by the feast! Think of a dog eating the children's

dinner as if it were common food ! It was even so with this fool. He ate his handful and sanctified his suicide by the quotation of a proverb. Scripture misapplied is the worst blasphemy. "If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness !" It is well that men who conduct certain processes in life should be called by plain names. When Coheleth saw a man folding his hands together and eating his own flesh he did not hesitate to describe that man as a fool. We can begin our estimate of human character from one of two points : we can watch the process and then attach the right name to it ; or we can fix our mind upon an imaginary character and then attach the right issues to the qualities which make up such a personality—that is to say, when we see a man whose watchword is, "Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep," we may rightly call that man a fool ; or, having imagined to ourselves what a fool is, we can describe him as a man who will say, "Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep." For the want of moral firmness to describe people and processes by their right names, a very important element in the discipline of life has dropped out of human speech. Probably no writer in all the sacred canon has used the word "fool" more freely than the wisest man of all. As for the quotation of wise and weighty sayings, or of proverbs which have been confirmed by general experience, men should be extremely cautious. It is often easier to quote a proverb than to realise its fitness to the occasion which has elicited the quotation. The proverb given in the sixth verse is full of beauty, and is founded upon a deep philosophy, yet even a proverb of this kind may be disastrously perverted. We must take care what the "handful" is : it may be the seed we ought to sow, the capital we ought to use, the beginning of a possibility, and not the end of a process. Even wise proverbs may be unwisely applied.

Now Coheleth turns from the fool to look at the lonely man—the hermit who dwarfed the world into a little cell :—

"There is one alone, and there is not a second ; yea, he hath neither child nor brother : yet is there no end of all his labour ; neither is his eye satisfied with riches ; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good ? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail. Two are better

than one ; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow : but woe to him that is alone when he falleth ; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat : but how can one be warm alone ? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him : and a threefold cord is not quickly broken " (vers. 8-12).

The lonely man was a miser also : " Neither is his eye satisfied with riches." He thinks he will live by himself and be happy. " O for a lodge in some vast wilderness ! " Surely a man will never differ with himself ! But Coheleth soon found that loneliness was not happiness. If a lonely man falls down he has nobody to help him up ; if he is cold, he has no one to cheer him ; if he is attacked, he has no one to defend him. Loneliness is a failure ; solitariness is the midway point between life and death. We need each other's presence for criticism, for discipline, for the culture and strengthening of our best powers. Society is educational by its very constitution. A walk through the crowded thoroughfare is an intellectual tonic. A day on the streets is a lesson with manifold and graphic illustrations. So Coheleth dismisses the fool and the hermit as failures. The protest against solitariness throughout the whole scope of the Bible is an intimation of the great truth of human brotherhood, and of human brotherhood as a special medium through which divine communion is realised. It is perfectly true that a man may have secret fellowship with God ; this is livingly and blessedly true ; at the same time it is only part of an infinitely larger truth—namely, that humanity is greater than any member of it, in other words, that the whole is greater than the part. " Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." " Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together." A man may suppose that he can read the Bible in solitude and profit by it : to a certain extent that also is a most blessed and comforting truth ; but as in the former instance it is a fraction, not an integer. There is a public reading of the Word—a reading under circumstances which excite our broadest sympathy and deepest interest, a great general music that ennobles by its very volume, as well as a quiet and private ministry of divine music. We were made for one another, and to break up society into mere individualities is to commit a species of homicide. Every life waits for some other life. It is impossible to enjoy even

Nature so much alone as it may be enjoyed in congenial companionship. Every man has his own point of view ; all the points of view are brought together, and the beauty of each is realised ; so all nature becomes a glorious appeal to the eye of the body, and to the keener eye of the soul. It is precisely so with all religious influences and ministries. The sanctuary is the public home of the saints, and as when children who love one another are gathered together in the family home and minister to each other's delight, so Christians of every degree and quality gather together into one multitude, and stir one another's faith and purify each other's emotion.

Now Coheleth begins to moralise :—

“ Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished ” (ver. 13).

What of the label if the bottle be empty ? Sad indeed is it when the man's name is the greater part of him ! A king without kingliness—is there any irony so mocking and tormenting ? Better be a good hearer than a bad preacher. Whatever we are let us be that well. A jackdaw has some respectability as such, but not a whit when he steals the peacock's feathers. “ A live dog is better than a dead lion.” What disastrous possibilities there are in life ! Imagine the possibility of a man being described as “ an old and foolish king ” ! The word “ king ” represents eternal youthfulness, energy, and influence ; the possibility described in the text is that the term “ king ” may remain when all its kingliness has departed. We are manifestly called to progress in life, so that in old age we should be wiser, purer, and gentler than ever ; but there stares us in the face the ghastly possibility that the years may but increase our weakness, and the multitude of days may but make our folly the more apparent. Christianity calls upon us to make our old age into an aspect of youth. There is to be no old age in the sense of spiritual exhaustion, or moral decrepitude, or misanthropic isolation ; old age is to be equivalent to increase of kingliness and bounty and holy influence. When Coheleth distinguishes between the poor and wise child and the old and foolish king, the poor and wise child should remember that even he may become old and foolish in the long run. When we lose our childhood we may lose our

wisdom. The only guarantee of continual elevation of character and moral progress is in the daily discipline which neglects no detail, however small, and which considers that nothing has been done whilst anything remains unattempted. The most pitiful aspect of the old and foolish king is in the words, "who will no more be admonished"—that is to say, who will receive no more lessons, accept no more expostulations, pay no further attention to human counsel: a man whose obstinacy is complete, and whose self-conceit prevents his feeling self-reproach. A most pitiable wisdom this! Here is a man who excludes himself from all the public influences of his time—in other words, from all the remedial and helpful ministries brought into action by an expanding civilisation; he considers himself complete, he will receive no further instruction,—in very deed he assumes the prerogative of God. All this kind of conduct is persistently rebuked in the Bible. We are called upon to make continual progress, to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and never to consider that we have attained or apprehended in fulness. On the last day of our study our watchword is to be "Light, more light!" In the very hour of supposed completeness of character we are to return the congratulations of friends with the assurance, "I count not myself to have apprehended. . . . I press toward the mark."

All this survey on the part of Coheleth is the best possible preparation for the inquiry—Is there anything better than Coheleth has yet found? Regard Coheleth as one who goes out to find the Holy Grail, and who comes back with his note-book full of instruction and full of disappointment. He has mounted the high hills, and thrown his line into the deep pools; he has watched until his eyes failed through weariness, and tarried until his limbs were numb with cold, and sleep laid hold of his eyelids; but the Holy Grail he has never seen! Enough we have had of the negative side of life; now we want the positive, and for that we must go to a greater than Solomon. Who, then, are blessed, and on whom does the spirit of a sweet content rest like a dove from heaven? Where is the joyful heart, and where the spirit that sings its tender hymn in the cloud and the night and beside the grim grave? Is there any man who is like a

tree planted by the rivers of water? Is there any soul that suns itself in the calm of heaven? Yea, surely. Yea, the Lord's children, whose faces are Zionward, know how to sing the Lord's song. They have found that joy is not a tinted bubble sailing on the fickle breeze, but is the fruit of the tree of righteousness. If the tree is not good, the fruit cannot be good. "Ye must be born again." The outward cannot be right until the inward is right. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Life is not a study of attitudes and colours and momentary impressions; it is a deep reality, it is a secret hidden with God; and not until we are right at the very fount and core of life and motive, can we be right in our external relations to nature and society. We must distinguish between a trick and a philosophy; between a calculated morality and a spiritual righteousness. The children of God have learned that dying things cannot give undying pleasure. That, one would suppose, would be an obvious commonplace; yet we find all men more or less exposed to the temptation of imagining that the things which are perishing around can minister to imperishable delight, or can indeed supply that ineffable and eternal gladness. Some men have to go a long way round to Jesus Christ. They have to suffer daily disappointment in finding their wells filled up, their orchards stripped, their fields blighted, and all their fortune laid in a heap of ruin; and when they have tasted the vanity and the folly of all life which appeals to the eye and charms the mere imagination, they begin to ask solemn questions, and whilst they are asking such questions, answers may be given to them from heaven.

Chapter v.

A CALL TO REVERENCE.

THE subject is now changed. Up to this time we have had Coheleth's view of life given with much graphic force and vividness. We have seen his world—a mere card-house of a world, well painted and wonderfully gilded, yet cold and full of discontent, with "Vanity of vanities" written in boldest letters over its portals. Now Coheleth turns to a higher theme. Yet, though the subject has changed, there is no change in the main principle. Coheleth is still talking about vanity, insincerity, and unsatisfactoriness; his strong point is that we may turn the sanctuary itself into an unreality; that the outside world may absorb the sacred enclosure, and that prayer itself may be turned into a mere trick of words. Let us get the Preacher's notion of the house of God :—

"Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil" (ver. 1).

We are here called to reverence and solidity of character in the place of prayer. Do not be giddy, flippant, and impiously merry in the sacred place. Do not go to talk, but to listen, and be sure to leave all foolishness outside. "Be more ready to hear than to talk." Do not go to the house of God to teach, but to learn. Listen for the coming of the Holy One. Let no vulgar voice throw the spell of its rude music upon you, but open your ear toward heaven and wait patiently for God. Into these modern words may we throw the advice of the Preacher. This is the code of proper behaviour for the sanctuary. The house of God is not a debating club, nor is it an academy of science, much less is it a place of mere entertainment; there is an altar there and a holy revelation, and the omniscient God, and the very air is full of watching and helping spirits. "This is none other than the house of God." Let a man go into the holy place boisterously,

self-sufficiently, hot from some vexatious debate, or worried by worldly memories, and he will scare away the spirit of the place; but let him go penitently, simple in purpose, conscious of need, with a heart full of expectation and tender desire towards God, and the poorest music will swell into grand anthems, and the simplest discourse will glow as with fire from heaven. "Draw not nigh hither : put off thy shoe from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." "Keep thy foot:" put off thy sandals from off thy feet. "The captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua: Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy." So there is a right way for the foot in the sanctuary. Is there a more unseemly sight than that of irreverent trampers in the house of God? Are there not many who defile the floor of the house, nor care how their feet injure the very woodwork of God's place of rest? Reverence is the first element of worship. Everything of the nature of restlessness or fretfulness in connection with the services of the sanctuary is to be most solemnly deprecated. "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord." "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." The presence of such a spirit in the worshipper will be a guarantee of reverence, simplicity, and intensest earnestness. Flippancy can hear nothing in all the music of revelation, or in all the sacrifice of song. Its ear is full of vulgar noise, and its eye is on the outlook for objects that can entertain or amuse. Flippancy is an offence in the house of God, and should be scourged out of it, not only because of what it is in itself, but because of its mischievous influence upon the young and the devout. Distinctions must be drawn between place and place. There is common ground upon which all the usual engagements of life can be conducted, but beyond that line there is a sanctuary in which men should tread cautiously, and into which they should look reverently, and where they should listen with profoundest awe, because the only voice to be heard in the sacred place is the voice of God and truth.

"Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few" (ver. 2).

We have not known the proper place of Silence in the worship

of God. We have unduly magnified the eloquence of man, and waited for the opening of human lips rather than for the opening of the gate of heaven. Why should there not be a few moments' silence in every service? Think of a great congregation with bowed heads silently praying for the coming of the divine kingdom, patiently and lovingly expecting the baptism of the Holy Ghost! Would not the sight please him who looks upon the heart and delights in the expectation of his people? Instead of that what is too often seen? Love of excitement, impatient waiting for a favourite preacher, discontent if the pulpit idol falls short of his own mark. This is not worship; it is indeed little better than blasphemy; there is no supreme love of God in it; it is a Sunday gallop through a religious picture gallery—spiritual dissipation thinly disguised by decorous habit. Even when we take part in the worship of God vocally, we should criticise the words we speak lest they convey false meanings to ourselves or to listening heaven. Men may tell lies in hymn and psalm. At the same time it is possible for men to use the noblest forms of adoration, confession, and supplication, and for each worshipper to attach his own meaning to the holy terms he is employing, so that God may know the exact meaning of the worshipper's heart. Even in our prayer and praise we may suggest unworthy doubts in the form of asking questions in reverent terms. The psalmist confessed his own infirmity in this direction; he said: "Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" Then he remembered that he was but revealing his own infirmity, rather than correctly describing the divine relation to the human race. An instance is given in the New Testament, in which rashness was quietly condemned by Jesus Christ. The suppliant woman said: "Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said: Ye know not what ye ask." Coheleth says, "Let thy words be few." This is not to be taken literally, as if the words were to be numbered and not to exceed so many. The spirit condemned is the spirit of talkativeness, talking for talking's sake—mere intellectual flippancy. A prayer may be long in time yet short

in quality ; that is to say, so long as the heart can really and lovingly talk to God, even if a whole night be spent in prayer it shall be reckoned but as the lapse of a moment. When men speak merely for speaking's sake they do not pray. "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do : for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

"When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it ; for he hath no pleasure in fools : pay that which thou hast vowed. Better it is that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay" (vers. 4, 5).

How few men have any adequate idea of the extent of the sin of breaking vows ! We should be astounded if we knew all that can be said respecting this iniquity. The immorality of nominal Christians in this particular is simply prodigious ; so much so that a signature is of no value, a promise is but idle breath, a vow is but a word spoken in heat and allowed to cool into a lie. The Bible insists upon every vow being performed, even though, in some instances, the purpose of it may be to the hurt of the man who is bound by its terms. "That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt vow and perform." "I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble." "Thy vows are upon me, O God : I will render praises unto thee." If all the vows which we have spoken could be now fulfilled, how great would be the result ! Life should be rich with vows : they throw a glad solemnity over us ; they come before us as hindrances when we would go in forbidden directions ; they are voices that whisper in the wind ; they are appeals to our best strength. It is after all but a mean thing to say that we will refrain from making vows ; such a condition is not the joy of liberty, it is not the dignity of discipline ; it is looseness, license, wildness, selfishness. Throw the discipline of a vow upon passion : build altars all along the line of life's journey, and let those who come after us see how we have prayed, and how we have turned our vows into holy deeds. "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth." This was Old Testament morality in the matter of words. Is there any righteousness superior to that in all the writings of subsequent

revelation? Words are not mere sounds or terms or symbols; they are pledges, vows, oaths, unwritten obligations, and no man is to be trusted who can make light of his own word, or speak so lightly as really not to convey the meaning of his heart. "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a free will offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the Lord thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth." There is one vow which every soul is called upon to make, and that is to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. If we do not vow in one direction it may be because we are anxious to vow in another—that is to say, if we do not vow in prayer it may be that we may take larger license to sin. A very careful distinction should be made here by the spiritual student. Not to vow may be not to incur responsibility; at the same time, abstinence from vowing in an upward and heavenly direction may be a kind of negative vow to enjoy larger moral freedom from religious restraint. Let a man examine himself and be honest in his decisions upon this great subject. Coheleth says, in this fourth verse, God "hath no pleasure in fools," nor ought we to have. Fools are the burdens of society; fools have no right in the sanctuary. It does not follow that a man who is merely ignorant is a fool; this is a folly of the heart; it is moral lunacy; many a man who is almost a genius in mere intellect is the veriest fool in conscience, in sensibility, and in honour of soul.

Copheleth would make out that the sanctuary is wider than the mere walls of the nominal house:—

"If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they" (ver. 8).

We are cautioned against drawing religious conclusions from what is merely seen by the eye. The world has a side upon which "Atheism" seems to be plainly written. There are scenes which are positively irreligious. Events happen which seem to have no law; rugged, tragic, destructive events; but the

Preacher says, There is more than you see—there is an Eye looking through the cloud—there is a Judge who will do right. Do not distress yourselves about things you cannot control. We may tear ourselves to pieces by taking upon us the consideration of questions too high for us. If *we* be moved, will God be without sensation? If *we* cannot look on without rising anger, can the Judge of the whole earth look on without just indignation? “For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.” Throughout the whole Scripture we have seen how the Lord espouses the cause of righteousness, and sets himself in eternal hostility against the wicked. Early in the book we become accustomed to such an announcement as this: “The cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen¹ the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.” The outside of the sanctuary is not an unholy place. God’s light of common day is not a tainted thing on which no benediction has been pronounced. God’s air is not polluted breath. It is the joy of the Christian to believe that the whole earth is a consecrated place, and that God’s purpose is to scourge evil out of it and to fill the whole world with his glory.

“Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field” (ver. 9).

The profound lesson taught by these words is that where there is profit there ought to be religion. God has surrounded men with religious ministers that are not religiously named. All nature is meant to teach the unity, the majesty, and the bountifulness of God. The growing field is to be a kind of secular sanctuary in which men are to see the handiwork of the beneficent Father. The earth is for all: the humblest man is to find in it a standing-place for life and a resting-place in death. The earth is not to be held by great monopolists, but is to be considered the universal property of the human family. “The king himself is served by the field.” There are lines upon which all men are one. We are all guests at one table in the largest sense. Royalty cannot do without agriculture, no more can the poorest human creature who begs a brother of the earth to give him leave to toil. It does us good now and again to

get back to those common lines, that we may realise the unity of human nature, and feel how true it is that the prayer which suits all lips is the prayer of Jesus Christ, beginning "Our Father, which art in heaven." We are to be careful not to demand more of the field than we can profitably and beneficially use. We may love silver until we cannot be satisfied with it, and may desire abundance until increase fails to gratify. As hunger has its limits, so ought abundance to be set within boundaries marked by reason and justice. "They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition." The cautions addressed to rich men in the Bible are most poignant and numerous. "Go to, now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire." All these matters, however, do not come within the region of mere instruction; they are rather connected with the realm of pure spirituality. No miser was ever converted by lecturing. Probably, no covetous man was ever made to see the error of his ways merely through didactic philosophy. We can only be right in these lower matters as we are right with God. When we enter into the pureness of his Spirit, and the all-bountifulness of his heart, we shall know that the earth is for all, and that "the king himself is served by the field," because he is a man first and a king afterwards. To this happy issue, social revolutions of a violent kind contribute next to nothing. Right understandings as to properties and profits and social relations can only come through a wise and loving apprehension of the relation sustained by Jesus Christ to the whole human family. In the meantime there are great compensations to be enjoyed by all honest souls:—

"The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep" (ver. 12).

Many a man who has not the proprietor's parchment has the poet's appreciation of the landscape. Men should be more anxious to discover the compensations than to dwell upon the deficiencies and discomforts of life. *Cohemoth* was not slow to

notice many sore evils amongst those who seemed to have all the earth at their command; beyond all men he could see behind the scenes and fix his eye attentively upon the worm which was gnawing the root of the stoutest tree. The Preacher saw a sore evil in the fact that "riches" are "kept for the owners thereof to their hurt." Another sore evil he saw in the son rising to scatter the wealth of the father. And yet another sore evil he beheld, in that a man came into the world with nothing and with nothing went out of it, as if he had laboured for the wind and found no profit in all the storm. "Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him." "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He who enters into the spirit of this philosophy and bows himself under the influence of this sublime resignation can never be poor. His song is: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." Christianity rids us of the sophism that increase of possessions is increase of life. "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Even the psalmist had a foretaste of this great blessedness when he exclaimed: "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased."

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou dost see us as we are ; there is nothing hidden from thine eye. Thou knowest how far our spirit and our posture are one : we cannot hide the discrepancies between our ceremonies and our truest desires from the Living Eyes. All things show themselves to thee in their reality. Thou God seest us through and through : we cannot hide anything from thee ; the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. Thou knowest the thought before it is a speech—yea, thou knowest the motive in its earliest motion, in the deepest recesses of the soul. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God ; yet it is the best thing. Thou knowest our frame, thou rememberest that we are dust ; thou dost not expect more from us than our poor strength can give. It is better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men. Thy compassions fail not. Thou seest every upward look ; thou hearest every sigh that has in it the solemnity of prayer. Thou dost watch us in our best moments as well as in our worst, and thou knowest the gold that is to be found in all the mixture of our character. Thou dost separate the chaff from the wheat : the wheat thou dost retain, the chaff thou wilt commit to the wind. It is, therefore, better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men. Judge us, O God, and spare us ! If thy judgment come through our petition, it shall not be solely judgment : in it there shall be mercy and pity and anxious love, a father's desire to discover, even amidst ruins, some trace of filial attachment and childlike love. We put ourselves into thy hands, not for the judgment of the law, but for the consideration of mercy. God be merciful unto us sinners ! The Lord hear us wherein we desire his pity, and let him multiply it upon us until our sins be swallowed up in the appointed way through Jesus Christ, Son of man, Son of God, Lamb of God, Saviour of the world. Amen.

Chapter vi.

THE VANITY OF RICHES.

WE now come to some rough notes put down hurriedly in Coheleth's memorandum-book. They might be heads of discourses, or words overheard in society, or points set down for discussion ; at all events, there is no apparent connection between them, and no literary art in their distribution. We have to deal with separate thoughts rather than with a connected and cumulative argument, and as the expositor is bound by his author

we have no option but to look at these rough notes in the order in which they are put down by a very baffled and bewildered man.

"There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: a man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease" (vers. 1, 2).

This is an English picture, appallingly vivid in colouring, to be seen before the Royal Academy opens and after the Royal Academy closes, and to be viewed without money and without price. It is the picture of a man with plenty to eat but with no appetite! with innumerable horses but without any wish to go out! with golden goblets on which Gout is written in letters fiery in their redness! It is the picture of a man who has got all he wants but cannot use it. Riches are not uncompounded joys, nor is greatness, nor is fame; the sting, the thorn, the poison-drop are everywhere. What is it that accompanies the most sumptuous chariot on the brightest day on which it can roll forth amid the gayest scenes? who can name it? who has not seen it? It is a something imponderable, intangible, yet inevitable and continual: the brighter the day the surer the accompaniment; yet it is useless; it cannot be bought, it cannot be sold, it cannot be got rid of! that accompaniment is the chariot's own *shadow*. What is true thus, in a merely physical and literal sense, is true in the highest moral relations. Everywhere there is a signature of disappointment or dissatisfaction. There is a tomb in every garden.

"If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he. For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing: this hath more rest than the other" (vers. 3-5).

Cohemoth now gives another picture—a man with ■ hundred children living many years, so many that he seems to have no burial, so far is death from the sunny scene; but this man's soul is practically dead; so much so that Cohemoth says that an untimely birth is better than he. The thing that is wanting is

appetite, desire, relish, power of appreciation ; the things are all beautiful, but the man does not care for them ; he has lost all interest in the merriment of children, in the schemes of youth and the battles of manhood, and his palate has been sated with luxury and wine. The result of that satiety is tastelessness, so that all things come alike to his exhausted palate. Rinse the mouth with alum—do not spare the alum ; use it again and again, and once more ; and then drink the richest wine of the richest vintage, and it is but so much ditch-water in the mouth. It is even so when desire faileth or the power of appreciation is gone ; then the hundred children are a hundred burdens, and music is an irritating noise.

We are to understand, then, that *desire* dies, that appetite languishes and perishes, and consequently the things that please us now will some day have no charm for us. The woman of fancy was the liveliest girl of her day, a lover of all beauty, and brightest queen of the summer, the chief of singers, glad of the merry dance, and quick at humorous repartee ; but the plough-share has gone deep into her heart, and to-day her laugh is but a sigh of sadness, and the old springs of life that sparkled and flashed have been dried up by the hot sun. "So we ripe, and ripe ; so we rot, and rot."

"I cannot love as I have loved,
And yet I know not why,
It is the one great woe of life
To feel all feeling die :
And one by one the heart-strings
snap
As age comes on so chill,
And hope seems left that hope may
cease,
And all will soon be still.

"And yet the things one might have
loved
Remain as they have been—
Truth ever lovely, and one heart
Still sacred and serene.

* * * * *

"From life to death, from death to life,
We hurry round to God,
And leave behind us nothing but
The path that we have trod."

But suppose a man should live a thousand years instead of a hundred ? Well, let him live a thousand years twice told ; this is a question which is not affected by time. Is there any use in watering a dead tree ? Can any man make wine out of painted grapes ? Can the cleverest man fill a sieve with water ? Our digestion perishes ; the faculty by which we lay hold of life with a view to life's enjoyment decays, so that at last we have eyes

but see not, ears but hear not, faculties unimpaired in form but utterly useless.

Now Coheleth asks a startling question :—

“For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living?” (ver. 8).

It would certainly appear from the outside of things that the fool is as well off as the wise man. The fool can eat four meals a day—can the wise man eat more? And in trial of character what hath the wise man more than the fool? It is as easy to assail the one character as the other. Nay, the impeachment brought against a wise man might in some quarters be more readily credited than if the same impeachment were brought against a fool. It is always thought possible by some minds that the greater the man the more surely must he have committed himself in some direction. Persons who would not pause to consider an accusation against a fool would constitute themselves into a jury to consider a case directed against a wise man. The wise man has more enemies than it is possible for the fool to have. The wise man is a continual rebuke to the ignorant, the narrow-minded, and the miscalculating. Society, in many of its departments, would not be sorry to get rid of the wise man, for his is an eye of criticism, and his a word of judgment. The man who can please is often more popular than the man who can instruct. The fancy that flashes is often more sought after than the understanding which can weigh and determine. This, of course, is a superficial view, and is not to be taken as Coheleth's final summary of human life. He is simply reading appearances, and quickly annotating the daily pages of life as they are turned over by the hand of Time. He is giving us a photograph of the spirit of his day. This is a kind of news column. He himself was a wise man, and therefore would be the last to be content to be ranked with fools. The wise man has what the fool can never have: intellectual companionship, spiritual sympathy, speculations that call off the mind from parochial affairs, aspirations that would shake off all the dust and noise of a chaotic world, citizenship in spheres high and fair, where the light is pure, and the time is music, and every waft of air comes straight from the fountains of immortality. The wise man is never solitary. He sits in

quietness, yet roams the field with the bold hunter, or dares the sea with the brave mariner. He makes his way through the crowd, his mind the while picking its more delicate way through mazes of divine philosophy, or up the winding steep of knowledge, difficult of access. The fool is a hollow drum, tempting the rude staff of every grinning swain; the wise man is an oracle for consultation in perplexity and in grief. Do not, therefore, understand Coheleth as putting the wise man and the fool upon the same level. Coheleth means what he says when he exhorts his readers in these terms: "With all thy gettings, get understanding"; "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom." By bringing these passages together we are enabled to see the purport of Coheleth's criticism in this verse. He is rather relating the opinions of other men than giving his own judgment.

"Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit" (ver. 9).

Better is the seen than the invisible: "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Why not make yourself contented with a present earth without aspiring to an uncertain heaven? To this inquiry we might reply that the earth first becomes an intolerable monotony, and then it becomes an incurable pain. When men ask, Why not be content with a present earth? they might as well say to a bird, Why not cut off your wings, and be satisfied to walk upon common ground? Here the mystery of instinct opens up its wide philosophy. We feel that there is more within us than can be satisfied with all that is grown upon the earth; and it is in response to this feeling that we utter great prayers, though sometimes we only designate them by the intellectual name of inspirations. God has set eternity in the soul. Man wants to have that eternity here, and he finds it impossible. We are drawn forward by eternity. It is a magnet which draws us by subtle and uncontrollable energy. Christ, however, teaches that eternity is the continuation of time, and that we are to be in the next world what we are already in this, only with enlarged faculty and purified desire.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, the morning is thine, and all the light, and the great Book, and the glory which burns in it. Thine is the house, and our song is in thy name, and our cry is unto thy mercy, and our eyes are turned towards the hills whence cometh our help. Behold the sacred occasion, and thou wilt not be wanting on thy part to make the fire glow, the flame ascend heaven-high, and our hearts to burn with new love, and our minds to rejoice in the light of newly-perceived truth. Thy part is never wanting; thou dost wait to be gracious; thou art more ready to give than we are to ask. If we are straitened, we are straitened in ourselves and not in God. We have not because we ask not, or because we ask amiss. We acquit the Holy One of Israel; we may not complain of our Father. Our sins have kept good things from us; our iniquities have gathered like a cloud between us and God, so that we do not see the light, or hear the song, or enter into the mystery of the higher fellowship. This is our doing, not thine; the separation is our sin, not thy decree of disregard for the human race. If we take our sins to ourselves, the burden is more than we can bear: but by penitence and broken-heartedness and hope in God, we are enabled to take the burden to the Cross, and there to lay it down, never to be resumed,—a burden destroyed and cast into everlasting forgetfulness. This is the triumph of the Cross; this is the success of the pierced hand in which there still lingers almightiness to save. Give us sweet consciousness of these facts; touch our minds with their wondrous mysteries; subdue our hearts by their marvellous pathos. Surround our lives with that sense of redeeming care which receives its highest, sublimest expression in the Cross of thine only Son. Let thy blessing come down upon us like showers that water the earth; let it steal in upon us with all gentleness and peacefulness, so that we know not that the door is opened to let it in until our hearts are conscious of its marvellous presence and benediction. Let the busy man remember that the kingdom of heaven is not in the dust; let the man who trifles with his time be assured of its brevity and uncertainty; let the hard heart that has never offered hospitality to the God that made it be broken—but not with the tremendous hammer of thy righteousness, rather by the entreaty and the persuasion of thine unspeakable love. Now gather us, embrace us, draw us nearer to thy fatherly heart, make us at home in the wilderness, and give us great happiness in desert places; and at the last bring us every one, no wanderer lost, into the green paradise, the beautiful garden, the land of cloudless summer, washed in the blood of the Lamb, sanctified by the mighty energy of God the Holy Ghost, made fit for heaven's light, and heaven's sweet society. Amen.

Chapters vii., viii.

SOME STRIKING VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE.

WE are still in Coheleth's memorandum-book. There is little or no connection between these scattered sentences. To read them is like stepping upon stones that have been laid in a brook, rather than crossing a well-built bridge.

There is a mournful tone in this seventh chapter. It is full of dyspeptic and disagreeable remarks. Cypress shadows lie over it, with hardly a breeze to disturb them and to let the light twinkle and sparkle between the dark bars. Coheleth is in a bilious mood to-day; his curtains are drawn, his lamp is lit early, all relish has gone out of his mouth, and he listens with a kind of grim joy, as if he heard Death clambering up the stair with a *Fieri-facias* in his hand from the court of Fate. No young heart can read this chapter with any sympathy. It is sprinkled thickly with sentences that an exhausted *roué* might have written in a mood of semi-bilious penitence. Death is better than birth; mourning is better than feasting; sorrow is better than laughter; the end is better than the beginning; and things generally are odd and stiff, with plenty of disappointment and mockery in them.

It ought not to be true that death is better than life, and that sorrow is better than laughter. This is unnatural, unreasonable, and discreditable. It is like saying that failure is better than success. The purpose of God certainly went out in the direction of joy, light, satisfaction, and rest, when he made man in his own image and likeness. As he himself is God blessed for evermore, so he would that all his loving ones should be as he is, full of joy and full of peace. God has no delight in tears, and a moan is a poor substitute for a hymn. If you set real sorrow against real joy I do not hesitate to teach that joy is better; the fact that sorrow is often far more real than joy, and by its very genuineness it is so much better, is because it moves the very springs of life, it stirs and rouses the soul, it makes men think deeply and long. But what is joy as popularly understood? It is not joy at all; it is a momentary titillation of the nerves; it is a movement

of the facial muscles ; it is a weird grin—a flash—a bubble—a dream—a lie !

For this reason, too, it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. In the house of mourning our best faculties are touched and our deepest sympathies are called into activity, and we get a truer measure of the scope of life. Feasting is physical ; it perishes in the using, and the finest wine is ruined by exposure to the air. If the feast were a feast of reason, and of the fat things set upon the table of God, Coheleth would be wrong ; it is but a banquet of froth, spread on a table of cloud, and anything that touches the quick of the heart is better than the moth-like wit that scorches and kills itself in the flame of inordinate wine. We ought to see quite as far through the medium of joy as through the medium of sorrow. The look of joy is through the windows of morning, through the gates of the rosy dawn, or through the arch of the perfect noon. The look of sorrow is through the avenues of the clouds, with a star here and there feebly struggling with the blackness of night. Sorrow is a look through tears ; joy is a great glad expectancy. Sorrow goes out towards rest, quietness, peace, cessation of trouble ; joy goes out on strong and flashing pinions towards higher gladness, purer light, vaster love. It ought not, then, to be true that sorrow is better than laughter.

Yet there is a sense in which Christianity will say that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. We are born into the temporary, the disciplinary, the imperfect, but if we are in Christ we die into the eternal, the completed, the restful. Many of the Old Testament expressions have to be completed by New Testament interpretations. When the worldling says the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth, he utters the moan of disappointment and bitterness of soul ; but when the Christian uses the selfsame words he seems to open a great golden gate, which swings back upon the infinite land of liberty and summer—the glorious heaven of God. A very needful thing it is to remember that the same words have different meanings as used by different men. It is the part of Christianity to take up the mottoes and the maxims of the world, and to set them in a right relation to things eternal ; a setting which will sometimes destroy

them, and at other times lift them up into new and glowing significance.

A thing wonderful beyond all others is this death-birth. The moment after death! When absent from the body are we present with the Lord? Do we at once throw off all weakness, and stand amongst the angels, strong as they, beautiful in holiness, and complete in satisfaction? Do we bid an eternal farewell to pain—the pain which has haunted us like a cruel ghost through the hours of childhood? Do we for ever cease to blunder and stumble? and do our feet take fast hold of the golden streets, never to totter or slip any more? Is the last tear gone, the last sigh spent, the last sin shut out from the purified and ennobled heart? If it be so, who can wonder that the day of death is better than the day of birth, and that the greatest of secrets will reveal the greatest of joys?

So far this chapter has been dark enough. We have walked through it up to this point as through a dark and gruesome night. But the chapter is not all gloom. We get glints of spring light even here, and above all this cold night wind we may hear a note or two of bands and choristers far away, yet quite accessible. As water is valued more in the desert than in the land of pools and streams, so we may set higher store on what we find here in the way of sure and immediate joy than if we had found it in any one of David's triumphant psalms. "In the day of prosperity be joyful. . . . God also hath set the one over against the other. . . . He that feareth God shall come forth of them all. . . . The excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it." It seems needless to say that we are to rejoice in the day of prosperity; yet it is not needless: we are not to take our prosperity as we would take medicine; we are not to issue our wedding invitations on black-edged paper. There is little enough true prosperity in life; therefore make the most of it. Men are not to take their brief holidays in a serious light. Sometimes pleasures are very leaden-footed; they are owls that like the night, rather than larks that hail the day with early gladness. Then to help us to make the best of life *Cohemoth* says God hath set the one over against the other. A wonderful

piece of mosaic is life ! the lights and shadows are marvellously distributed. If your tiled hearth was laid by a cunning hand, was the mosaic of life arranged by chance ? You are poor in money, but how rich you are in health ! Or you are feeble in health, but how comfortable in circumstances ! Or you are poor both in health and circumstance, but see what marvellous spirits you have ! You live in a small house, then you have few anxieties ; your pleasures are limited, then your account is proportionately small. Truly God hath set the one over against the other. If we take the bright side there is always something to make us humble, and keep us within proper limits. You have magnificent health, but you may suffer from depression of spirits ; you have a well-laden table, but you have no appetite ; you have boundless information, but no gift of expression : so God hath set the one over against the other. There is a rent in every panoply. There is a crook in every lot. Why ? Coheleth answers, "To the end that man should find nothing after him ;" literally, to the end that man should have no power over the future. God will not entrust the future with any man. The future is so near, yet so far ! What we would give if we knew exactly what would happen to-morrow, or what would be the detailed result of our schemes, or what would be the answer to letters involving our peace, fortune, joy ! The future is the very next thing we shall come upon, and yet it spreads out over all the spaces of eternity ; it is an hour, yet it is an everlasting duration ; it is measurable as a human span, yet it is as illimitable as infinitude ! The future is the riddle which vexes us beyond all others, because we feel as if we ought to know an answer which must be simple and easy. Yet how much we owe, both in the way of stimulus and in the way of education, to the mysteriousness of the future ! What poetry is there in a straight line ? What enjoyment is there on a road which is never bent into curves or broken into undulations ? It is expectancy—call it hope or fear—that gives life a rare interest ; hope itself sometimes brings with it a sting of pain, and fear now and again brings with it even something of a weird pleasure. Hope turns the future into a banqueting-house. Ambition forecasts the future with great plans of attack and defence. Fear anticipates the future so as to get from the outlook restraint and

discipline. Life that has no future would be but a flat surface, a stiff, awkward monotony, a world without a firmament, a boundless cemetery; but with a future it is a hope, an inspiration, a sweet, gracious promise; it is, too, a terror, for we know not what is behind the cloud, nor can we say what foe or friend will face us at the next corner. We live a good deal in our to-morrows, and thus we spend money which does not fairly belong to us; yet how poor should we be if we could not turn our imagination to some account, and mint our fancies into some little gold to chink in our hands, that we may scare our immediate poverty away! What beautiful drives we have had in the carriage which we are *going* to buy in a year or two! How often we have laid out the garden which is *going* to be ours in years to come! We once set up fine houses with broken earthenware, and before we outgrew our jackets and pinafores we had made eternal friendships, and set our proud feet on a conquered and humbled world! And yet the future is always in front of us, a shy but persistent coquette, vouchsafing a smile, but throwing a frown over it; telling us to come on, yet leaving us to topple over an unseen stone, and to fall into an invisible pit, which we could never have discovered had it not first thrown us! The past has become a confused, dull, troubled noise, as of people hastening to and fro in the night-time; but the future is a still small voice, having marvellous whispering power, with a strange mastery over the will, soothing us like a benediction, and anon chilling us like a sigh in a graveyard. The past is a worn road; the future is a world in which all the ways have yet to be made. I would bind you, then, to a high general estimate of the future, as being by the very fact of its being future a high educational influence; an influence that holds you back like a bit in your foaming lips; an influence that sends you forward with the hunger of a great hope, relieved by satisfactions which do but whet the desire they cannot appease. Thank God that there is a future; that there are days far off; that there are clouds floating in the distance, beautiful enough to be the vesture of angels, yet solemn enough to be the sheaths of lightning. So again we come upon Christian interpretations of non-spiritual words. Whilst Coheleth, for the moment representing the thoughtless crowd, dreads the future, and flees away from it as from an enemy, the Christian looks

forward to it with a high expectation, and longs for the disclosure of all its beneficent mysteries.

In these chapters Coheleth gives striking views of human nature. He does not speak merely about a man here and there, but about all men. It will be interesting, therefore, to know how so shrewd and frank a man regarded human nature from his standpoint. Some of his sentences sound like divine judgments. Take chapter vii. 20 :—

“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.”

There is a black thread in the whitest soul. How far does this judgment agree with what we know about ourselves? Are we all gold through and through without one speck of alloy? Are we pure like snow newly fallen on untrodden mountain-tops? We have not been slow to say that there is undoubtedly a great deal of good in man. We are very possibly generous, hopeful, pleasant, neighbourly, well-disposed, but what is there under all that—a long way under it? Go into the solemn place where motives are—that far-in engine-house, where the subtle power is that moves the whole life, and say whether the devil is not often in that house, stirring up the fire and setting the wheels in motion. Let the holiest man amongst us force this inquiry to decisive issue. You, for example, are a minister of Jesus Christ, and by your very profession you are not unnaturally assumed to be a peculiarly holy man; at least in all your uppermost wishes you cannot but be pure and noble. Now consider that immediately in your neighbourhood there is a rival minister who is supposed to be more popular than you are, to attract a larger share of public attention, and to be carried onward as by a breeze of popular favour to high and substantial success. Now in the sight and fear of God how do you regard such a man? Do you in your very soul rejoice in his honour, and pray secretly that it may be continued and increased? and are you the more prayerful in this direction, and the more earnest in proportion as your own popularity suffers by the fame of your neighbour? Can you bear to see the public turning away from your own church and hastening towards his as if he rather than yourself had a direct message from heaven? Is there no disposition, hardly known to yourself, to mitigate somewhat the blaze of his renown,

to suggest that though he is showy he is weak ; to point out that although undoubtedly he has some talents he is lamentably deficient in others ? These are questions which pierce us all like sharp swords, and they are not to be turned aside as if they were flippant and useless in a great spiritual inquiry. Coheleth allows that there are just men, but he says there is not a single just man that sinneth not ; that is to say, his justice is impaired by certain flaws and drawbacks ; it is by no means a complete justice ; it is a broken, infirm thing, which draws upon itself disapproving criticism, and exposes itself sometimes even to contempt. Now what is it that can reach down to that far depth of evil ? It is at this point that we need a voice other than our own, and a revelation which human genius would never have conceived or projected. It is when we are in hell that we most feel our need of heaven. Listen not to the superficial moralists who will tell you that character is an affair of rearrangement, colour, and attitude ; but listen with profoundest interest to the evangelical preacher, who assures you that you must be born again, otherwise the kingdom of heaven is an impossibility in your experience.

Here we have another view of human nature :—

“Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright ; but they have sought out many inventions ” (ver. 29).

That is to say, man has lost his perpendicularity, and he has taken out many patents for its restoration. You have seen a wall falling out of square, and have observed how carefully the wall has been shored up lest it should quite fall down. If we could only see the great human heart as God sees it we should see that it has lost its uprightness, and that it is being shored up by inventors and schemers of every name and kind to prevent an utter and final collapse. Human life is a struggle to get back to the moral square, and truly there are many inventions. One form of religion says : Trust everything to me : I will do everything for you : I am the priest of heaven, and in my hands are the keys of the kingdom : confess your sins to me, put yourselves absolutely under my control, do not attempt to form any judgments of your own, and I will see to it that you are properly prepared for heaven. Another form of religion says : Distrust the speaker

who has just delivered himself : he is a papist and an impostor, antichrist, the man of sin, the very emissary of Babylon ; he seeks men's souls to destroy them ; he would extinguish the right of private judgment, he would depose individual conscience, and substitute priestly counsel and direction : the right way is for every man to think for himself, to make debate a religion, and to fight his way to sound intellectual convictions. Another invention says : Never mind any of the religious speakers who address you : they are all the victims of ghostly superstition ; they are wanting in practical sagacity and in thorough grasp of time and space and the whole world of sense : look carefully about you and see how things lie ; turn all circumstances to your own advantage as far as you possibly can ; cultivate a masterful spirit, overrule and overdrive everything, let the weakest go to the wall, and in all circumstances, night and day, summer and winter, do the best for yourself : that is my common-sense religion, that is my practical philosophy : I am no ghost or spectre, or foolish chattering voice in the dark : I claim to be a messenger of practical common sense, and I tell you to find in the earth all the heaven any man can need. Then what social schemes we have for the amelioration of human affairs : what a tax upon sanitary arrangements, physical conditions ; what endeavours to instruct the ignorant, rearrange the relations of capital and labour ; and what efforts there are to turn political economy into a species of religion ! What is the meaning of all this but an attempt to get back to the moral square ? Many inventions ! clever enough, cheap enough, dear enough, plentiful enough, but Failure written upon every one of them, for they that use them are as a bowing wall and a tottering fence. No happier term could be applied to them than the term "inventions," clever little schemes, pet little notions, patents newly turned out, small mechanisms, anything that indicates a debased ingenuity, a paltry and self-defeating cleverness.

But with all his inventions and scheming there are two things which man cannot do. First, he cannot tell what shall be :—

"For he knoweth not that which shall be : for who can tell him when it shall be ?" (viii. 7).

Here the pride of man comes under daily rebuke. Though

he may be able to see many years behind him, he cannot see one hour in front of him. When he vapours about his power, and sends forth his ambition on its broadest wings, he cannot tell but what in the evening he may be dead and almost forgotten. When he lifts his puny fist in the air he knows not whether he may ever bring it down. Be careful, O loud boaster and rippant swaggerer! That gabbling tongue of thine talks riotously without sense or dignity, and it will bring thee into peril and misery and sharp pain! You have invented a field-glass, a telescope, a microscope; you can see fifty yards ahead, or can get a view of shining points far away, or catch some little traveller trotting in vast excursions over the unexplored Africa of a grass blade. Now invent a glass that will look into To-morrow, or even a glass that will look farther than we can now see—where is the prodigal that ran away a year ago, and of whom his mother has never heard; or the ship that ought to have been in port a month since; or the explorer in the wild forest? tell us these things, and then we shall know something of human might and grandeur. “He knoweth not that which shall be!” Yet such is the fascination of the future that man is always thinking about it. The very fact that he does not know what it will be seems to awaken within him a speculative genius, a spirit that will make all his calculations turn upon the possibilities of To-morrow; mathematics will be made into an instrument of speculation; the most careful reckoning will be gone through in order if possible to anticipate the shape and tone and manner of the future. Yet there lies the dead secret; nothing can charm it into speech, the cleverest man cannot tempt it to give up its mystery. Man may look far behind him, and study the fully-written page of history, but he cannot turn over the leaves of the Future; those leaves can only be turned over by the invisible hand of God.

The next thing man cannot do is to retain the spirit in the day of death:—

“There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war” (ver. 8).

Man has fought some little battles and won some little victories, but here is a fight in which his banners must be dragged in the

dust, and he himself must fall. His brazen shield is of no use. He knows not where the enemy may strike—in the spine, in the forehead, in the heart, in the foot, in the lungs, but when he does strike he cleaves right through to the startled and quivering life. Oh, poor are our barricades against this great foe! We have gone into the chamber where the battle has been fought and lost, and with a grim and mournful humour have set in array the weapons of the poor human fighter—the mixture, the pills, the thirsty leech, the sharp blister, the instrument keenly edged; the appointed hours for attention to medical direction, the cooling draughts, the soothing appliances, the narcotics, the stimulants, all the various instruments and weapons of medical skill—there—all there—waiting to be used, willing to conquer, anxious to succeed. Look at them! Laugh at them! Black Death was too cunning and mighty for all their subtlety and strength. So he has borne away his prey, and none can recall him, and make him deliver that which he has wrested from the hand of love.

Now all this being the case, we want a higher power than man's to trust in. We have had enough of human invention, human consolation, and human flattery; all these have but vexed and mortified us; we trusted in them, and they brought us nothing but disappointment; we cannot in justice to our own spiritual dignity listen to them any longer. Oh that we knew the place of the Eternal! Oh that we could find the living One, and plead our cause before him, asking him to pity our infirmity, and to make our very littleness and weakness the ground of his coming to us, in all the pathos and helpfulness of his condescending love. Whilst we are uttering these aspirations, and are thus sighing away our little strength, we are told that there is One who has come who is mighty to save—none other than the Son of man, the Son of God, to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given, who will answer our questions, soothe our agitations, wash away our sins, sanctify us wholly by the mighty power of his Spirit. The answer of the Gospel to human necessity is a grand answer, and by so much as it is notable for moral sublimity it should be considered as the most probable of all the solutions which have ever been offered to the problem of human life and the mystery of human destiny.

"And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done : this is also vanity" (ver. 10).

A very graphic and truthful picture. The wicked buried and forgotten. The candle of the wicked shall be put out. The name of the wicked shall rot. The wicked man may have a very boisterous day, and may create great uneasiness by his violence, but he will go out like a dying candle, and no man will mourn his loss. "I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not : yea, I sought him, but he could not be found." No wonder that the wicked man dreads the Bible, as the leper might fear the mirror which reveals to him all his loathsomeness, for the Bible haunts him, smites him, and visits him with the most appalling humiliations. "The triumphing of the wicked is short." "Though his excellency mount up to the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds ; yet he shall perish for ever like his own dung." They who have seen him shall say, Where is he ? He shall fly away as a dream, and shall not be found ; yea, he shall be chased away as a vision of the night. To see the rage of the wicked, and hear their oaths and asseverations, one would say, Surely they will pluck up the foundations and overthrow the throne, and they will carry out their will to its uttermost purpose and desire. Yet, lo, they are covered with darkness, and their boasting tongues are sealed in silence everlasting. They hold up their heads as if the sky were too low a roof for their proud stature, and, lo ! they stumble into a pit, and no hand plants a sweet flower on their grave. They sleep on an unblest pillow, and rot away in a prison whose doors open only towards penalty and shame. "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not," for their way is towards darkness, and their victories are full of stings and pains.

"Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (ver. 11).

Thus the patience of God is misunderstood and abused. We are all tempted to wonder why God should allow the wicked to live even for a day. There is one world amid the stars which reeks with foulness and corruption ; up from that unholy place there goes a continual smoke of abomination ; it fills the air with

pestilence, and its voices of sinful utterance almost throw into discord the sweet harmonies of the upper spheres. Why does the Almighty allow that mean world to smoulder, and to fill the higher air with vapours offensive and deadly? Why not crush it, and destroy it, and cause its name to be blotted out from the list of fair stars that have never sinned? These are questions which philosophy may ask, but which philosophy can never answer. Let the parent reply who spends many a sleepless night over the prodigal whose name he can never forget! It is only love that can make any answer amid these solemn moral mysteries. See how the divine patience is misunderstood and abused! Imagine another system of discipline: God standing over us with a rod of iron, and instantly that any man sinned that man should be struck dead! Such is not God's government. He is long-suffering and pitiful and kind and hopeful. But it is exactly this which is misunderstood. Because he does not do it men think he cannot do it. Who can understand patience? We admire violence, we call it high spirit; we applaud instancy of penal visitation, thinking that it shows how just we are; but who can understand mercy, or see in forbearance the highest aspect of righteousness? "Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" God does not shut the door hastily; he comes out and watches, and hopes and waits. He is determined not to begin the festival until the very last guest has at least had an opportunity of arriving. He would seem to be more deeply moved by the absence of some than by the presence of many. Who can understand the heart-ache of God's love? He does not hesitate to describe himself as grieved and disappointed, as sorrowful and as full of pain, because the children whom he has nourished and brought up have rebelled against him. But let us clearly understand that though God is forbearing, there will come a time when even He will no longer strive with men. "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." At the same time he has said, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." "He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."

"Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God" (vers. 12, 13).

The forbearance that is shown to the wicked is not shown at the expense of the righteous; that is to say, it is not something subtracted from the heritage of the good man. Nor is it a sign of forgetfulness on the part of God as to the deserts of the wicked. God will not hastily strike the ground from under the feet of the bad man; rather he allows that ground to crumble away little by little, showing him the consequences of what he is doing, and calling him all the while to the rock everlasting. The bad man seems to have a long lease, but what is it but a shadow? The time is only long in appearance whilst it lasts, but as soon as it has fled away how poor a thing it seems to be! Where are now the men who have lifted their mouths against the heavens, and sent forth their defiances as against the eternal arm? what is the life of man but a handful of years at the most? and if he has made no provision for a blissful eternity he has been dying whilst he lived.

Divine forbearance has always been more or less misunderstood. This is made clear by verse 14:—

"There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity."

This was the impression produced on the public mind by the apparent good fortune of the wicked. "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?" And they called the proud happy, and set up them that worked wickedness—"They say unto God, depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?" It was questioning and rebellion like this that led the Almighty to reply: "I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil." Let us allow that appearances are sometimes in favour

of this theory. It does appear as if the wicked had in many instances a lot preferable to that of the righteous, at all events quite equal to it. But consider the duration of the lot of the wicked: "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things." Then consider the compensation which righteousness never fails to realise in an approving conscience and in a bright hope concerning the future of retribution and adjustment; add to this the consideration that the Christian has a sure and certain hope of a glorious immortality. He says, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." His words are full of triumph: "We know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." The apostle was not slow to confess that if in this life only we have hope, we are of all men most miserable. Asaph confessed that the wicked were "not in trouble as other men; their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish." The apostle makes out a list of his personal sufferings, and whilst we read it we wonder that God should have dealt out such severity towards those who are uppermost and foremost in his holy service. But the apostle himself gave the right interpretation of all sorrows, losses, distresses; he says, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." The point of view has been changed. The standard of valuation has been altered. Looked at within the limits of time, religion as Christians understand it may seem to be followed by many a disaster; but looked at in the light of eternity, Christians are enabled to "glory in tribulations also," and to be exceeding joyful, even in the midst of multiplied distresses. This is a miracle which cannot be explained in words. It is the living and perpetual miracle of Christian experience.

Chapter vii. 14.

"God also hath set the one over against the other."

CONTRASTIVE DAYS IN LIFE.

THE wise man is speaking of two different days : the one he calls the day of prosperity, the other he calls the day of adversity. Looking upon both the days he says, "God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him." The wise man gives a direction for the one day in these terms : "In the day of prosperity be joyful"—wisely merry ; "in the day of adversity," he continues, be sad-hearted, frown with disappointment and displeasure and mortification. It is not so written in the text : "In the day of adversity, consider"—think, reflect, wonder how it all comes to be as it is. Consideration is not despair ; consideration is not atheism : consideration may be the very basis of piety. There is therefore here nothing that is pessimistic, nothing that is of the nature of despair or reproach against God ; there is but a summons to consideration. Our point, therefore, is that the economy of the world as we know it is so arranged and conducted that there is running through the whole a principle of balance and counterpoise and equalisation. Account for it as we may, an ample, nay a very partial, induction of facts will show that things do not all go on one side or on the other, that there is a mastery or domination balancing things, now calling up the right, now calling up the left, now driving clean abreast ; but still a master principle or invisible sovereignty. We may chafe, inquire, deny, but the world is its own Bible upon this point. Both days are needed. What should we do if it were always sunshine ? Is there anything more monotonous than midday ? We can do with a little sunshine, but not with very much ; we want the cool shadow. The shadow has as much to do with the

picture as has the light. Do not speak of shadows as if they were useless, or as if they were of the nature of punishment or reprobation; they help to express the meaning of the artist. It is so in our lives: we never should have seen ourselves as we are but for the uplifting, defining, and softening shadow. The garden would never have been half so precious but for the graves which are dug there. What should we do, on the other hand, if it were always a day of adversity; no singing bird, no rift in the cloud, no voice from afar, no sweet gospel falling upon our hearts' hearing at unexpected times; no music at home, no light in the fire, no joy underlying all the tragedy of this tumultuous experience? But "God also hath set the one over against the other." And we never can tell what a day may bring forth. To-morrow may be the brightest day we ever had in our lives: cheer thee! The heart says, I will—I will hope in the living God! To-morrow may be the blackest day that ever darkened upon our little life: think! Blessed are they who say, We will—we will consider this matter well; if the storm is rising, if the thunders are gathering, we will look out and prepare and arrange: to be forewarned is to be forearmed: thank God for this degree of forecast; it is not presumption, it is but another aspect of divinest, simplest trust.

Not only are both needed, but both are educational. We get more in the school of adversity than we ever could get in the school of prosperity. There is very little learned in times that are close upon the vacation. It is not the holiday that takes the people's attention, it is the three weeks before the holiday, when they are getting ready for it; they may not enjoy it when it does come, but they do enjoy the anticipation of it; business is partially suspended, things that were done with painstaking are now done off-handedly because the holiday is coming. It is in adversity that men think and study and pray, and begin that process of wonder which often ends in holy reverence. You have been taught something by prosperity; you have been taught that there is nothing in it. You have scores of gold cups upon your sideboard; put another score on: when you get beyond a certain point everything tends towards disgust, satiety, contempt. Up to a certain point you count your thousands, and

can handle them in a somewhat masterful way ; they are your servants, you can put them down and take them up, and rearrange their relations one to another, but when it gets beyond that point it gets into nothingness. Everything that is of the nature of time and space ends in ruin : the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, the elements shall melt with fervent heat, and the whole sky shall be rolled together like a scroll and vanish like a wraith. It is not in time to be eternal ; it is not in space to be infinite : men exhaust all time, and fall out of space into God's infinity. You have learned a good deal in adversity, you have learned who your friends are ; you thought they were six in number, and, lo, they are not one. You reckoned that when the day of adversity came there would be many doors open to receive you ; and there would have been, but that the occupants of the houses were unfortunately away at the time you called ; they were in the day before, and they will be at home to-morrow, but just when your knock fell upon the plain deal they were out. Adversity is a dear school to attend, but the teacher is a skilled monitor ; he knows how to write his lessons, often mournful, always useful, on the tablets of the heart. When I was in adversity, saith the soul, I found but one invitation ; it read sweetly ; I wrote it in my diary ; I made an appointment of it ; the words of the invitation ran thus : " In the day of trouble call upon me, and I will answer thee,"—the only invitation I had for that day. These are the words that lift the gospel so infinitely above the height of all other theories and philosophies of religion.

We have seen this principle of compensation or balance illustrated personally. We ourselves are illustrations of the action of this economy. You are poor ; that may be so from a monetary point of view, but money poverty is the very simplest and easiest of all kinds of poverty. He is poor who has no soul, no dream, no vision, no poetry, no sentiment, no outlook beyond the field of death. But take it even financially. You are poor : but look what a constitution you have, what health is yours. You are all red blood and iron sinew, and if you are down for a moment it is but for a moment, for you spring up again with an invincible elasticity : how can you, therefore, call yourself poor ?

You have much hardship to endure ;—so you have, but look what spirits you have ! your spirits are worth untold wealth : you cannot have a long face for more than a second, the very spirit of laughter is in you ; that spirit allows you sometimes to wrinkle your poor old skin as if it were going to settle down into furrows of melancholy, and then when you have got it all neatly arranged that spirit leaps up within, and rolls off the incubus and says, You have no business to be in this low mood : stand up ! “God also hath set the one over against the other.”

Look what wealth this man has ! He made thirty thousand pounds by one contract, all the while telling the people that he was making little or nothing out of it, and he never knew the times so bad as they are just now. He was talking of course in a kind of, shall we say, half-dream, half-nightmare ; he was not writing an affidavit, he was only telling another kind of story. What wealth he has, what piles of gold ! True ; and yet how fretful he is, how peevish ; nobody can live with him ; how snappish his temper, how cruel his tongue, how dissatisfied his whole spirit ! He has no joy in any green field he owns ; the pauper that leans over the stone wall and looks at it owns it more than ever he did. No matter who has the title-deeds, he has the land who has the landscape.

We have seen this principle illustrated not only personally, but nationally. The climate is very bad, but look what hardy men are reared under its cloudy skies, and are blown upon by its cold winds. The climate is splendid : yes, but look what listless creatures they are who inhabit the land shone upon by such fair suns ; they have no pith, no sinew, no adventure ; they never go from home ; they have learned to smoke the pipe of ease, and look upon its warm clouds as if they contained all heaven ; they have never discovered an island nor explored a continent : they suffer the disadvantages as well as enjoy the advantages of their splendid climate. “God also hath set the one over against the other.” Look at the division in political instinct. Is it not marvellous that there should always be a race for office between two parties having distinctly opposite policies ? Why does not the one party die off ? “God also hath set the

one over against the other." Why are we not all sound Tories? Why are we not all ardent Liberals? Because the world would go to pieces, so far as our nation is concerned, if God did not "set the one over against the other." It is marvellous how thus even in statesmanship and national governance and policy there is a principle of equalisation and balance proceeding. That would be so if there were no Bible. We are not now talking book-theology, something that we have learned from penmen; we are simply giving voice to patent, absolute, visible facts, and gathering these up so as to get out of them an argument and an appeal. How are all the lines of industry maintained? How can you account for these continual accessions to the diverse ranks of industry upon any principle of atheism? Do you suppose that any man would ever be a chimney-sweep if he were not born to it? How are the chimney-sweeps kept up? That may seem to be a grotesque question, but it is a deeply spiritual and metaphysical inquiry. How are the ranks of shoeblocks recruited? You would not be a shoeblock; but what would you do if there were no shoeblocks to be had for love or money? then you would have to be one. This has an aspect of practical comedy, but behind that there lies the great fact of sovereignty, purpose, government. Shoeblocks are born, not made, as well as poets. God makes everything there is. We think of God making the great heaven-soaring eagle—but he made the little titmouse as well; and one is as great a mystery as the other; and it required all the Godhead to make the simplest pulse that ticks within the rudest skin. Do not shut God out of his universe. He is Maker, Manager, Sovereign, Judge.

See what a distribution of talents there is! And the talents never did agree. It is a mistake to suppose that all the opposition or emulation is to be found amongst the very lowest classes of citizenship: even high up in the hierarchy of talents there is continual debate, continual assertion of claim against claim, and even up there plaintiff and defendant are common terms. All men are not born mathematicians; all men are not born poets. All men are not born so that they can take care of their own affairs. There are some men who ought not to have any affairs to

take care of. There are some of you who could not live a month if you had not somebody behind you or near you to see that your life was not sacrificed. That guiding angel may not always be seen, may not always come to the front, and say, I am the spirit that guides and defends thee; but the angel is there: are they not all the servants of men? We cannot tell what is proceeding. I have seen curious things in the air. By closing my eyes I have seen host after host coming to me, hovering around me, and sometimes I have all but heard what they said. There is a language of the dumb; there are schools in which not a sound is heard, but continual communication is taking place: the pupils and the teachers can read the language of the lip; without a sound messages can be exchanged, affections can be pledged, and schemes can be arranged; and have I not sometimes seen, as it were, the lips of the upper ones shaping themselves in forms that did not admit of two constructions, meaning love, hope, ultimate triumph, eternal joy? Let the soul deny this that has never seen it!

Here, then, we have an account given of contrastive days—the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. We see this process of equipoise developing before our eyes. Life is an economy. Here are facts to be accounted for, and the Christian expositor claims for this particular method of account four merits; he says, it is invested with the highest degree of probability; it occupies, secondly, the strongest position in reason; it offers, thirdly, the largest range of beneficence; and it produces, fourthly, the completest evidence of utility. Of course there is a disposition to get rid of the supernatural, but we cannot get rid of it if we read the unwritten Bible of our own history. It is no interest of ours to maintain the supernatural. There can be no particular delight in simply maintaining a metaphysical position of any kind; what delight there is in the maintenance of a metaphysical position can only be shared by a few ardent psychologists; but here is a life, and here are contrary days in the life, and here is an evident system of balancing and counterbalancing,—what are we to make of this? We could call it chance, but does that make us philosophers? then to be a philosopher were an easy acquisition. “Chance”—what does

it mean? Is chance itself a child of its own? Is chance the parent of chance, or chance the child of chance? It requires more faith to believe in this Chance than in any god I ever heard of. Here is this manifold, interpenetrating, self-rectifying economy; how did it begin? We could say it began without a beginning. Then there is no greater mystery in the Bible: the unbeginning beginning is but another aspect of the mystery which attaches to the existence of God. But say that the whole is presided over by a wise, loving, gentle Father, severe in righteousness, redeeming in love; say that the very hairs of our head are all numbered, and that everything is measured by scale, weighed in balances and directed to an issue, and that at the last the great audit will be held and the accounts will be signed; then you talk cold reason; that is good; you make life solemn, you give a value to every deed, you impart into every word a new and wide suggestiveness. This is the position occupied by the Christian preacher. We need such a man amongst us at all times, to correct, not a theoretical atheism, but a practical godlessness.

Who could preach an evangelical discourse from these words? Every man could. All texts lead to the Cross. If ever there is a text that has no relation to the Cross, then it is a text torn out of its proper place; read in its context, it points to the Cross. All the verses in the Bible, in their right places, combine to point an index-finger to a place called Calvary. You have murdered your text if you have not exhibited it in that relation. Let us see how this verse easily lends itself to evangelical uses. What temptation is this that tears men? what is this law in my members warring against the law of my spirit and against the whole law of light and love and progress? What is this devil? He tears me, he binds me, he throws me in the water, he plucks me from the pool that he may dash me into the fire. Can I live? No, but for the voice which says, "It is written"—"God also hath set the one over against the other." By temptation he drives us to church; by temptation he invites us to himself; by temptation—cruel, biting, tremendous temptation—he bids us pray. What is this sin that is in the world, this black-faced, fiery-eyed, foul-mouthed sin? What is this image wholly given

to death and hell, every finger an instrument of torture, of mischief, of wrong-doing : every look a blasphemy, every breath a malediction,—what is this gaunt, grim, tremendous enemy ? It is conquering all things ; it is desolating all minds, blighting all gardens, silencing all music, drying up all the crystal pools and sparkling fountains. No—see : what is this fair face that comes, what is this gentle voice that sounds like silver bells, what is this hidden strength in womanlike weakness ? Thy name ? Grace. What canst thou do ? Everything. Canst thou fight this black image ? I can kill that image. But he has conquered all the world ? No : where sin abounds grace shall much more abound —“ God also hath set the one over against the other ”—and Grace alone vanquisheth sin. What is this iron cruel law, this great wheel that grinds and grinds, and comes upon my poor life to crush every pulse of hope ? What is this law that will not be bribed, seduced, tempted, set aside ? What is this law that ignores importunity ? How cold, how passionless, how resolute ! It will have everything its own way. Hear the voice on the other side. What is this fair creature, fair as the sun ? Her name is Mercy. Can Mercy do what Law cannot accomplish ? That is the very function and design of mercy. God can be merciful to a sinner—Law cannot. If there were one touch of mercy in mere law, it would cease to be mere law. The mercy is external, foreign in a sense, and yet coming from God it can so affect law as to take away all its sting and terror, all its bitterness and sure ruin. “ God also hath set the one over against the other.” And this poor, little, dead, cold earth—there is not room enough in it to live in, there is only scope to die in—is this earth all ? is the whole universe under my feet ? Is there nothing to invite appeals, aspirations, and anticipations ? Is all above me a radiant cloud ? Then we are of all men most miserable. Oh, Loving One, Economist, Sovereign, what hast thou to set over against earth ? Nothing but—Heaven. “ God also hath set the one over against the other.” To grasp this truth in Christ is immortality.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thy praise shall never cease, because thy mercy endureth for ever : mercy shall excite praise ; thy goodness shall inspire our thankfulness : thus the song shall rise from earth to heaven day by day until time shall be no more. Thou dost love thy people ; thou hast set a seal upon their heart and a seal upon their arm, and the foundation of the Lord standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. Thou dost ask in return that we love thee, that our life be one of perpetual affection towards heaven, and that our affection shall express itself in daily industry and sacrifice. Thus, whilst thy love is poured down from on high and ours rises to thee in grateful answer, the heaven and the earth shall be filled with divine affection. We pray thee to receive all our thanksgivings for thy tender care ; thou hast been mindful of us with infinite love ; nothing has been wanting on thy part to complete our life with strength and beauty. Blessed Saviour of the world, thou didst wash our hearts with thy most precious blood, and cleanse us from every stain of sin by the ministry of thine own sacrifice. Thy purpose is to make thy Church a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing—fit bride for thyself, thou Lamb of God. Enable us to realise our relation to one another and to thee, and may we know that the purpose of heaven is even our purification : every promise is a call to holiness ; having therefore these promises, we say to one another, Dearly beloved, let us purify ourselves, that the wine of God's love may be in vessels of gold, and that all thy care for us may be answered by our growth in grace and pureness. Thou knowest what we need to make our life really glad. Save us from pursuing false courses ; deliver us from all the fallacies and sophisms of a narrow outlook, of a mental imprisonment which shuts out half the light of God : may we know that there is no prosperity, real and enduring, that is not founded in righteousness ; may our cry be unto the living God, that being right with him we may be right with all nature, and may be received as children into the great family of the universe, and be no more strangers and foreigners, prodigals and aliens, but children adopted into thy family, secured in our adoption by all the omnipotence of thy grace : then shall our lives grow up before thee, strong and beautiful ; within their shadow shall men rest as in a sanctuary, and in the branches thereof shall birds sing like angels. Dry our tears ; give us rest awhile ; give us a place in thy sanctuary ; give us a little reviving in our day, and save us from the darkness which means despair and the despair which may end in ruin. And to thee, God most high, most holy, most tender, shall every hymn be sung in Christ's own sweet name. Amen.

Chapter ix.

THE LAND OF SHADOWS.

IN this chapter we have a number of loose and disconnected notes about human life. The writer seems to have jotted down things as they came into his mind. His book is rather a heap of stones than an orderly building. Perhaps it is hardly just to regard the Book of Ecclesiastes as a piece of elaborate and continuous logic ; it ought to be taken rather as a series of notes or memoranda which the writer himself could have expounded, and which readers can only use as hints pointing out certain directions of practical thought. It would be possible so to use the Book of Ecclesiastes as to make it almost contribute to an argument for atheism, but this would be manifestly unjust ; yet in proportion as it yields itself to such a use does it seem to suggest that it is rather a gathering of miscellaneous remarks than an attempt to establish a process of final and authoritative reasoning. Sometimes Coheleth becomes religious, as in the first verse of this chapter. He has made many attempts to get God out of the way altogether, but somehow the holy Presence returns to the line of life and shines upon it, or darkens it with judgment, or so uses it as to startle the man who is most peculiarly interested in its course.

"For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God : no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them " (ver. 1).

Thus life is seen in a great thick maze, now and then broken in upon by startling radiance. Sometimes wisdom is supreme, and sometimes folly ; now it seems as if wisdom would carry everything its own way, and presently it seems as if folly had been but waiting for an opportunity to overthrow wisdom, and show that life is after all either an elaborate joke or an elaborate failure. At the very moment when the wise man has seen the superiority of wisdom, and declared it, a voice says to him : "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches." Even when wisdom has been used for the best purposes, and when might has been enlisted on the side of right, and when wealth

has been pledged to the cause of justice, all boasting on the part of wisdom, might, and wealth has been resolutely forbidden. There is to be but one object of glory: "Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." The picture of mental confusion which is presented in verse 1 is familiar to us all. Finality of judgment is not granted to man. It appears as if he must live continually in the process which is full of disappointment, and yet which is so urgent that it cannot be permanently resisted by the skill or the perversity of man. We know all this to be absolutely true. We have made the surest calculations, and our conclusions have been simply overturned by facts which never came within our view in making our elaborate reckoning. We have said that yesterday being such and such would inevitably make to-morrow of a certain quality, and yet God seems to have taken a new point of departure, and to have turned to-morrow into a revelation such as we had never dreamed of. We walk, therefore, in the midst of shadows; we are surrounded by uncertainties; we are never permitted to approach the point of personal infallibility; we live in a course of self-correction, and we grow wise to-morrow by amending the errors of yesterday. On the whole, this would seem to be the wisest method of education. At first sight other methods appear to have the advantage, but considering what we are, to what temptations we are exposed, and to what issues we are tending, experience confirms the course which providence adopts.

"All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath" (ver. 2).

Cohelah is here lost at the point where the two great lines of bad and good seem to meet and to become one current. To his great wonder he sees death seize both the righteous and the wicked; he sees them both going down the hill together, and as he looks from the hill-top, he says, I expected the one to go upward, and the other to go downward, but there seems to be but a common lot for all, so that moral distinctions really amount to nothing. Cohelah undoubtedly had appearances upon his side

in this reason. There is not the broad distinction between the good and the bad at the last which one might have expected to find. That death should happen to all men is simply a surprise to those who have observed the character of goodness, and who have felt themselves impressed by the immortality of virtue. It would seem as if at the point of death there should be a distinctly visible difference between good men and bad men; that is to say, good men should rather ascend and disappear in the welcoming heavens, and bad men should descend and find their place in the sullen earth. Instead of this we find both good men and bad men dying, sometimes the good man as if under a cloud of depression, and the bad man in a mood almost heroic. All this is perplexing to the religious conscience and the religious imagination. Sure, we say, there might be some broader distinction at the point of death than we have yet discovered; if that distinction could only be established, it would at once substantiate the Christian argument, and destroy the standing-ground of every man who ventured to doubt the reality of Christian revelation. In all ages the prosperity of the wicked has been a perplexity to spiritual minds. "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power? Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave. Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways" (Job xxi. 7-9, 12-14). It is in vain to make light of a testimony of this kind, for it is indeed the occasion of a sore perplexity to the religious conscience. If there is any truth at all in the doctrine of rewards and punishments, why should not the rewards be now given, and the punishments be now and visibly inflicted? It would seem from many statements in holy Scripture as if the discrimination between good and bad were postponed until the day of judgment, and as if in the meantime men had to do the best they could for themselves, the wicked often having an advantage over the righteous. On the other hand, we must not neglect the counter-testimony which is also found in the pages of revelation. In Job again (xxi. 17, 18) we find such words as these: "How oft is

the candle of the wicked put out! and how oft cometh their destruction upon them! God distributeth sorrows in his anger. They are as stubble before the wind, and as chaff that the storm carrieth away." But even this counter-testimony often gives way in force as compared with the testimony on the other side, which is so broad and emphatic. The wicked themselves have built an argument upon these very appearances which so distressed the soul of Asaph; for example (Mal. iii. 14, 15): "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered." It is, however, not to the disadvantage of the Bible that all these testimonies are found in its own pages. We must insist upon that as a valuable consideration in the discussion of the whole argument. It is the Bible itself that actually supplies the very evidence which men so eagerly turn against its own inspiration and its own doctrine of a superintending providence. Apart from the emphatic statements which are made in the Bible, where would evidence be found to support the theory that the wicked are as much favoured as the righteous? We might have broad declarations upon the subject, as based upon this man's observation or that man's collection of facts; on the other hand, we should have both the experience and the facts hotly disputed by others who had happened to see more vividly the other side of life. We should thus be plunged into a controversy which would rage around personal authority and personal opportunities of observation; whereas in the Bible itself we find the most distinct statement of the perplexities arising from an apparent moral confusion in the world, as if sometimes God had actually mistaken the bad man for the good man, and had sent down his punishments indiscriminately, often causing the good more pain and loss than were inflicted upon the evil. It is well, therefore, to have in the book itself a distinct statement that such moral confusion does exist, at least upon the surface, because this imposes upon the book the responsibility in some measure either of modifying its statement or contravening it; otherwise the reader would be forced to the conclusion that the policy of evil is stronger than the policy of good, and must ultimately extinguish it.

"This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all : yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (ver. 3).

Cohemoth thinks this has a bad effect upon society. He thinks that a sharp distinction between the fate of the good and the bad would have been better. It is very wonderful to think in how many points we suppose ourselves able to do things better than God has done them. We want to see more. Both the good and the bad plunge into the common darkness of the grave. That seems wrong, as we have said. If we could hear the moaning of the bad man as the scourge of judgment falls upon him, and if we could see the good soul mounting up with wings strong and flashing to join a host of immortal worthies gathering within the field of the sun, it would seem to be better altogether ; but the good and the bad are sucked into a common whirlpool, over which the darkness of night is spread. The argument of Cohemoth would seem to point to the thought that God actually encourages evil by not sufficiently punishing it, and strongly discourages good by apparently handing all his rewards to those who are bad. Cohemoth would seem to trace the madness of men to the looseness of Providence. The sons of men say, Seeing that one event happeneth unto all, what does it matter how we live ? Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die ; seize the immediate pleasure ; make sure of the things that are round about us, and leave to-morrow to develop its own uncertainties as it may. We cannot live under theories of good, and philosophies of happiness, and ideals of peace ; all these may be well enough, and may afford great enjoyment to the philosophers who set them up, and spend their days in their wordy defence, but we, say the sons of men, want wine and festival, dance and joy, liberty and enthusiasm, and we must have these immediately, and facts enable us to have them ; so why do we theorise, and speculate, and idealise ? Let us instantly be up and doing, and serve the first god that offers us his bribe. This is the loose talk of loose-minded men. They do not take in the whole case in its yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow ; they see but the immediate glittering point of time ; in other words, they live in time and not in eternity : hence we have all this selfish contemplation, and

all this superficial reasoning, leading to all this immoral action. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." There again we see exactly the point at which man so often fails. He must have things done "speedily"; if the sword of judgment fell upon the criminal in the very act of his transgression, superficial thinkers would at once be cleared of all doubts as to the reality of a superintending and judicial Providence. But they make no room for mercy; they do not see how divine patience may be equal to divine righteousness; they think the punishment of the sinner a greater deed than his possible salvation. Punishment might be instantaneous, but salvation requires long processes for its accomplishment. How noble is the mercy of God as compared with the fitful wrath of man! God indeed does pronounce judgment upon evil, and show himself hotly angry against it in all its varieties and moods; at the same time he is faithful to himself; he promised that the seed of the woman should bruise the head of the serpent, and he associates even wickedness itself with the vast scheme of remedy, amelioration, and redemption, for the full working out of which immeasurable time may be required. The Apostle Paul reasons upon this matter in a more rational and comprehensive manner: "What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death" (Rom. vi. 21). It may be reverently said that God himself was surprised by the license which man allowed his imagination when he saw how wickedness was often spared, as if God had some hope of even yet converting the sinner from the error of his ways. "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. vi. 5). The very greatness of man was developed in the greatness of his sin. It was evident that a man formed in the image and likeness of God, if he did take to evil ways would work mightily and terribly, and would show by the very inversion of his faculties how sublime was the destiny intended for him by his gracious Creator. It is because we can pray so nobly that we can curse so bitterly. It is because we are so much like God that we can debase ourselves almost into the likeness of devils. Our greatness is the opportunity for our wickedness. "Let him that thinketh

he standeth take heed lest he fall." In our very highest moods, when we seem to be but just outside heaven, we are in greatest danger, if so be we cease to pray and to hold on to the hand of the Almighty with growing determination and hopefulness.

"For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun" (vers. 4-6).

Cohemoth did not care for death in any aspect. He would rather live with the dog than die with the lion. The words "death" and "hope" seem never to have come together in Cohemoth's thinking. And surely if one shall arise in the ages who shall attempt to connect hope with death, to bring together things so separate, he will have a soul capable of magnificent conceptions. Life and hope have always gone together as brother and sister, well matched for strength and beauty, and suffused with a common loveliness. But death and despair have always been companions; their groan has troubled the world's feasting, and their shadow has thrown a spectral haze over the birth of the firstborn and over the joy of the wedding festival. How, then, can hope be joined to death? And how can the grim beast of prey be made to lie down harmlessly with the gentle lamb? Sweetly, like a friend's voice in loneliness, there comes upon us a prophecy that death need not kill, that death may be a disguised messenger of God, and may be but the narrow line over which we pass into immortality. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, for they rest from their labours; and their works do follow them." "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; . . . for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

We get a very humbling picture in the sixth verse. Here again we are brought into the land of shadows, and into the region of winds that blow without leaving behind them any trace either of wrath or blessing. Is it possible that a life so constructed can charge the responsibility of its existence upon a

loving Creator? The contrary is evidently the case. If men can come and go without leaving any impression; if their love is but for a moment and then forgotten; if their wrath is but a splutter followed by eternal silence and oblivion; if all their thought and pain, all their scheming, invention, and enterprise shall end in nothingness and vanity, who then is responsible for a creation so destitute of coherence, and so utterly worthless in its whole issue? The very emptiness of the conclusion should lead us to doubt its validity. Rather let us reason that, because such great agents are employed, and such little results are apparent, the time of measuring up results has not yet fully come, that we are living in an intermediate period of time, and that presently, perhaps to-day or to-morrow, a great light will shine upon the mystery of life, and show us its real meaning, and force us to answer its high responsibilities. The answer to all the difficulties of outside life must ever be within the man himself. Puzzled by contradictions, perplexed by want of discrimination on the part of Providence, confounded by the evident success of wickedness, man should look within himself, and there he will find in his own religious consciousness the true answer to all that bewilders him when he contemplates the outside alone. In so far man will be as a god unto himself. He will have the full consent of reason and conscience in saying, Surely all this can be but for a moment; I do not see the complete state of the case, nor do I understand the reality of the events that are passing around me. I must patiently wait, for conscience tells me that judgment must follow wickedness and that heaven must be the portion of virtue. I am aware that appearances are bewildering and perplexing, and if the question were an external one altogether I should say but little against the argument of irreligious opponents. My safety is in waiting; my assurance is founded upon the eternal principle that what is wrong must eventually bring judgment upon itself, and perish in its own corruption.

"Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun" (ver. 9).

Here Coheleth himself becomes a kind of moralising pagan. God is allowed to drop out of sight; life is limited by the horizon,

and he who dances most and drinks most is the wisest. Thus Coheleth seemed to play at hide-and-seek with eternity: he is in, he is out; he is grand, he is mean; he is now on the hill-top, and now he is lost in the windings of the valley. This is just our own life. Sometimes we give up prayer, and say we will now betake ourselves to sensual enjoyments. We turn away from religion as from an altar on which we have never found anything that can really satisfy the soul. A great temptation seizes the mind, and hurries us on to all kinds of immediate enjoyment. We say, After all, what does it amount to? we had better eat the fruit which is already within reach than wait for some other tree to grow us some other fruit. Then we achieve, as it were, our majority in wickedness, we become men in evil-doing. A kind of rough joy, too, follows immediately upon our decision, for the earth is ready with its store, and the evil spirits seem but to have been awaiting a signal to enter into our souls, and make a banqueting-house of them. Music is expelled by noise. Philosophy is deposed by sophism. The grave loses its terrors because it is covered with plucked flowers. Thus life has its seasons of madness, its times of outburst and vain enjoyment, even its seasons of tempestuous delight in which we forget everything but the gratification of the moment. We know, however, how all such satisfactions exhaust themselves. They are keen for the moment, but they perish in the using. Before we seize them we are assured that they will bring heaven into the soul; they look so enticing, and they promise so abundantly, but it is the universal experience of man that no sooner are such pleasures realised than they cease to please; not only do they cease to please, but they leave behind them a mortal sting, and the soul which they promised to make glad for ever burns with disappointment and hangs down its head in shame. Here the Christian teacher is not afraid to make his appeal to experience. There is no form of fleshly enjoyment which does not immediately upon its indulgence turn itself into an enemy; yet how luring is the temptation, how eloquent is the promise, how almost irresistible is the appeal; but the victim is led away like a lamb to the slaughter, an arrow pierces through his liver, his teeth are broken as with gravel-stone, and he who ran out to enjoy the liberty of sin is sent back to endure the bondage of compunction.

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest" (ver. 10).

This verse contains good advice if we take it wisely. We must first be sure that the work which our hand finds to do is worthy of our best powers. This exhortation has undoubtedly been misapplied. There is a better proverb, "Whatsoever is worth doing is worth doing well." But it does not follow that everything is worth doing. Jesus Christ said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." We must be sure that we are doing God's work if we are to do it with our might. Following upon the ninth verse the exhortation of the tenth may actually be an encouragement in a wrong direction. In the ninth verse we have been enjoined to "live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity"—in other words, to enjoy all the pleasures the world can give; and then we are told, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." The one caution which must be regarded is the caution that whatever we do is itself to be of the right quality, to be worth doing, to be good in itself, and to be beneficent in its relation to other people. These points being assured, then let both hands be called into activity, and the whole soul burn with devotion to the great object of its accomplishment.

"I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but, time and chance happeneth to them all" (ver. 11).

Now we come to a higher order of talk. Coheleth looks at life as a whole, and sees something in it which surprises him. It seems as if the race ought to be to the swift, and the battle to the strong, and as if the wise should never lack bread, or the men of understanding be short of riches. Yet men of skill are allowed to go without favour, and time and chance happeneth to all men alike. When we see likelihood set aside we ought to ask ourselves some serious questions. We say that the law of cause and effect must operate, that it is supreme and all-determining; yet this mechanical law is overthrown every day in actual life, showing as plainly as light that life is something higher than

mechanics. Who would not instantly insist that swiftness must win the race, strength must determine the battle, and skill must settle the competition? Yet these things are contradicted by every day's experience. The very law of gravitation may itself be temporarily suspended. He who drops a stone obeys that law, but he who lifts a hand defies it. The tiniest life is greater than the greatest mechanical law. Seeing, therefore, that probability, or likelihood, or the so-called law of cause and effect, may actually go for nothing in the arrangement and balancing of life, we ought to ask, What is behind all this? what is the meaning of this secret? what is the explanation of this most palpable and bewildering contradiction? Now we may see in Coheleth's words a greater meaning than he himself saw. We say, What can be stronger than the great gravitation law? and the answer is, Life may be stronger. We ask, What can outspeed the lightning? and we answer, Thought can more quickly fly, and love has a stronger wing. Coheleth saw in the little incident which comes next a complete upset of the law of probability. A little quality may upset a great quantity. The least in the kingdom of heaven may be greater than the greatest out of it. It is the little wisdom that is in the world that saves all its cities. In point of bulk wisdom may be less than folly, but in point of force wisdom will prove itself to be omnipotent. This is the lesson of the incident which Coheleth gives in the following verses:—

“There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man” (vers. 14, 15).

The incident is but small as compared with what has already been said regarding the pomp and boast of wickedness; yet the smallness of the incident is the smallness of its seed, not the smallness of a pebble. “The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed;” so is this incident. “By the blessing of the up-right the city is exalted.” Ten righteous men would have saved the cities of the plain. It is surely discouraging that the poor man was not remembered, though he delivered the little city when a great king came against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it. Nevertheless the wise man will not give up his wisdom, for he finds a secret delight in its enjoyment. “Wisdom

strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city." It was the wisdom of Jesus Christ that astounded his contemporaries, and made them marvel concerning his origin and his resources. From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this that is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? It is important to notice that the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. As this is true in the common walks of life, we are prepared to believe it true in those higher relations which Jesus Christ sustained to the world. He was despised and rejected of men. We are prone to say, Show true wisdom, and the world will instantly recognise it and obey its behests. History gives a flat contradiction to this supposition. The world has not known wisdom when it has seen it, nor answered the voice of eloquence when it has heard it, nor bowed before the presence of beauty when it has been most openly revealed. Yet the wise man must not be discouraged, for his time is yet to come. It is still true that wisdom is better than weapons of war. All that the wise man can do is to hold on, and hope on, and toil on. The greatest surprise that can occur to him is that other people do not observe and acknowledge the value of wisdom. This must be a pain to his inmost heart, and a source of discouragement, which can only be dried up by considerations which lie beyond the line of time. Who could bear to teach constantly a school of dunces? Who would not shrink from being called upon constantly to sing to men who are deaf? Who could stand the wear and tear of attempting to teach blind men the beauty and the charm of colour? Yet this is what Jesus Christ has undertaken to do in the proclamation of his gospel and the revelation of his kingdom. Verily it is hard work; upon all sides there arise the questions, "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?"

All this is true; yet wisdom is its own inspiration. The wise man, like the good man, is satisfied from himself, and in storm and calm, by night and by day, he pursues his way, quite sure that the end will justify his forecast and reward his patience.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, thou art alway calling us to larger life and larger liberty and deeper joy. Thou dost call upon us to advance, to grow, to ascend ; thy whole speech to us is one of welcome and invitation to higher and securer places. We bless thee for this animating call, because it saves us from despair, and slothfulness, and neglect. May we hear thy voice, and obey it with all the eagerness of love ; then shall we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. We bless thee for the unsearchable riches of thy Son : who can discover them, or estimate them, or set a value upon such wealth ? May we know that we are rich in Christ, and can never be poor any more, because all his resources are placed at our disposal. He was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich. May we be rich in faith and love and all grace, and show our confidence in thee by daily trusting thee more and more, under all the burdens and in all the exigencies of life, with its poverty and its pain. Call us nearer to thyself, and hearing the call may we answer it joyfully ; may all our cry be, Nearer, my God, to thee ! We cannot be too near the Fountain of life, the Spring of all joy. Enable us, therefore, to feel the restlessness of spiritual discontent with all our present attainments, in order that we may be urged onward to the rest which comes through perfect sympathy with the Son of God. We pray that our sins may daily be forgiven through the blood of the everlasting covenant, through all the priesthood which that blood represents. Through Christ has been preached unto us the forgiveness of sins ; we have heard of his spiritual release, and we are filled with hope and gladness : may we enter into the blessed experience of this liberty, and thus have a joy unspeakable and full of glory. We have wandered far : call us home again ;—we have left the city and lived the desert life : may we return from the desolation of the wilderness, and find home and security in God's Jerusalem. Amen.

Chapter ix. 18.

“ One sinner destroyeth much good.”

PERSONALITY IN EVIL.

WE have often taken occasion to point out how easy it is to destroy. The illustrations which instantly crowd around the subject are as obvious as they are innumerable. One touch may damage what it would require hours to repair. A child can pluck a flower, but no angel can put it in its place again. A

frightful illustration that of some of the great moral processes which men may accomplish! To pluck the soul out of God really means to destroy the soul; because it is then cut off from the currents of vitality, and dispossessed of all that sustenance which is essential to the maintenance of the spiritual life. No man can put himself back again into God, so to say; nor can any angel do this work of reunion: but in the gospel of Christ it is distinctly declared that by the power of grace dead men may live, and even those who have committed spiritual suicide may rise again in the power of God. We need not hesitate to describe this as a miracle, for we gain nothing by lowering our terms, or robbing them of all their highest meanings, merely to please the carnal reason; regeneration must be regarded as the supreme miracle of God, and spoken of as such with thankfulness and reverence. We all know how true is the doctrine of the text in material things. It is the same in all social relations. For example, ask about a man's commercial standing in a doubtful tone, and that very doubtfulness has fastened a stigma upon the reputation in question; not a word may have been spoken which if put into print could be regarded as otherwise than respectful and even reasonable, but the whole meaning was twisted by the suggestive tone in which the inquiry was put. For this reason we can never understand any mere report of proceedings; we must ourselves have been present and noticed the spirit and attitude and tone of every speaker. This is the great advantage of examination and cross-examination in a court of law. Judge and jury see the witnesses, form an opinion of their appearance, hear the tone in which questions are asked and answered, and thus are able to bring living evidence to bear upon that which is merely verbal. The soul is the man. Bring an accusation against any one, and the charge may be remembered when the defence is forgotten; years after an enemy may feel himself entitled to ask whether once a very serious accusation was not brought against this or that man. This he may pretend to do with the utmost innocence; he may find it convenient to forget the reply which was made, it being enough for his malign purpose to suggest the existence of the accusation, though at the time it was overwhelmed and destroyed. Say that a man is "not sound in the faith"; nay, it is unnecessary to go so far as

to make a positive assertion,—inquire whether a man is not sound in the faith, and irreparable injury is inflicted upon that man's reputation. The accuser has always a great advantage over the vindicator. The human heart, explain it as we may, is predisposed to believe evil. We seem to like to hear evil of one another : it touches our love of gossip ; it excites our curiosity ; it appeals to our imagination ; it slakes the thirst of our depravity. You will find it to be true in human life that a wicked report is more freely circulated than a good one. Send about the report that such and such a friend is a good man, and the report may be listened to inattentively, and circulated with extreme reluctance, if circulated at all. The information that a man is good often goes in at one ear and passes out at the other. On the other hand, circulate a report that the very same person is far from what he ought to be in point of moral character, and the report will seem to take the wings of the wind, and to fly in every direction ; again and again it will come up against the man like a hot blast ; questions will be asked, attitudes will be assumed, inferences will be drawn from the most unsuggestive circumstances, and around the man an atmosphere will be created in which he can hardly breathe.

A fact so melancholy as this ought to teach us something. A fact so malignantly influential ought not to be lost, especially upon those of us who profess to follow Christ. Such a fact should supply us with a test by which to judge evil reports. We shall know ourselves to be in Christ, and to be breathing his spirit, when we encounter all evil reports with severe suspicion. We should never present a listening ear to the man who has evil to speak of his neighbour ; simply because we know that evil exaggerates itself, and is exaggerated by its reporters, and that cruel and even murderous words are easily spoken, and are often lightly remembered by the man who speaks them. It is an excellent rule in social life instantly to believe every good thing that is said of any man ; set it down, magnify it, illuminate it, repeat it everywhere ; for it is certain to be true, otherwise it could hardly have been conceived by one man of another. Never let a good action, as done by some other man, perish for want of reputation. On the other hand, distrust every statement

against a man's character ; give the reporter to feel that he is doing what to you is a most disagreeable business ; when he tells you that he was obliged to hear the report, instantly assure him that he was not obliged to repeat it. Do not be a thoroughfare through which all evil may circulate freely ; never consent to be the common sewer of the society in which you live and move ; let every tale-bearer feel that in you he certainly will not have an attentive listener, but rather an adverse and determined critic.

This fact should also diminish the influence of the mischief-maker. He must always be treated as a destructionist. Is it after all so very clever a thing to throw stones at a window ? Is he to be petted and fawned upon as a genius of remarkable capacity and energy who scratches with a needle-point the silvered mirror ? Is he to be listened to with respect, as a seer and a prophet, who tries by foul breath to dim the fine gold of a great character ? Again and again let us teach that there should be no place in decent society for any man who disparages his fellow-men ; he should not be listened to ; he should be made to feel that tale-bearing is immoral, and that to take away a character is to take away a life. That is really the point to be fixed upon with moral intensity. What is life without character ? The character is the man. Many a critic who would hesitate to injure a man's flesh, is almost eager to impair a man's reputation. The morality of the Church must undergo a thorough change in all these matters. To whisper that a man is not what he ought to be is really to put a knife to the man's throat. Let us, therefore, no longer hesitate to call the tale-bearer an assassin, an Iscariot, a murderer. At all events, we should insist upon having day and date down to the very moment of time at which certain things reported against the man are said to have occurred ; living witnesses should be called for ; every reference should be verified ; and in this way the news-monger would be made to feel that he cannot be permitted to go through and through society, scattering seeds of evil, but that everywhere he will be encountered with suspicion, judgment, and contempt. Good men should be stimulated to do their difficult part with more zealous diligence. It is easy to remove the bloom from a peach, but it is impossible to restore it. The great cathe-

dral which is the work of centuries may be reduced to ashes in a night. How hard it is to build it ! How easy to pull it down ! As Christians, we have the difficult work to do. How difficult to reclaim a man from an evil habit ! How earnestly he is to be persuaded, how carefully watched, how dearly defended ! You must neither fear him nor hinder him ; you must study his varying moods, and address yourself to his varying circumstances ; you must watch for his soul as they who must give an account. Beasts trample down, man must build up ; winter desolates, summer renews ; war destroys, peace reconstructs : one day of war can overturn the civilisation of a millennium. How hard it is to do good ! How difficult to save a soul ! We have heard of the white ant which works such havoc in the woodwork of some lands. It is never known what mischief the little insect is doing until its work is completed. Take the door of a house for example : it looks in perfect order ; not a single trace can be found in any part of the surface of any mischief having been done ; but attempt to open that door, and instantly it will be found that there is nothing but a skin of paint ; the white ant has eaten out all the wood, and left nothing which it could destroy. So it may be in our moral relations. Our social standing may appear to be just the same it ever was ; not a solitary change may be traceable upon all the surface of our lives ; so far as appearances are concerned there may be completeness and attractiveness in our position ; but a deadlier enemy than the white ant may have eaten out our character, destroyed our best motives and ambitions, utterly wrecked everything that constituted our noblest manhood, and at a given signal a touch may reveal the real state of affairs, and prove us to have been but painted nothingness. Never forget how easy it is to destroy. Take the most beautiful painting ever executed by human hands, and one daub of paint drawn across it by a ruthless hand destroys all beauty and value. It would appear as if in proportion to the ease of doing harm is the temptation to do it. In this, as in all other things, as we have seen, there is but a step between man and death. To have the power to destroy, and yet not to exert that power, is a terrible temptation to some natures. We have heard of instances in which men could not reason themselves out of a temptation to commit suicide ; they seemed to realise with a

new and strange delight of consciousness that their lives were in their own power ; theoretically they would always have admitted this and treated it as the simplest of commonplaces ; but in some particular moment there has rushed upon them the consciousness that they could actually take away their own lives, and the temptation has been suddenly carried to the point of irresistibility. We are always within one step of suicide. There is but a word between us and utter destruction. One action of the pen, and our whole character is destroyed for ever. Whilst this is true with regard to the individual man, it may be said to be true in a peculiar sense with regard to social man, and to come upon us in that aspect with strong temptations and seductions ; for whilst many men would hesitate to commit suicide, they almost feel delight in committing murder. Yes, we murder men, let me say it again, when we take away their character. Fear not them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do ; but hold in deadliest fear the men who would throw a slur upon your character, or in any way filch from you your good name.

The text brings before us the figure of the sinner. Truly he is an old character in human history ! We ought to be familiar with his aspect by this time. But our familiarity with him may have bred disregard of his influence. Our efforts are not to be directed against the sinner so much as against the sin. Herein it is that Jesus Christ comes before us as no other reformer ever appeared. He will not merely reason with the sinner, pointing out to him the consequences of his actions, and showing him the better way even from a political point of view ; no ; he will go further than this ; he will address himself to the very springs of life. What he wants may be described not so much as good works as a good worker ; therefore he proposes to regenerate the heart, to renew the innermost springs of vitality, and to make man "a new creature" : "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature : old things have passed away ; behold all things are become new." It is useless to reason with the sinner unless, behind our reasoning, there is the assurance that we can, by the grace of God, bring him to feel that he cannot heal or restore himself, but must be redeemed with an unspeakable price, and regenerated by the mighty energy of the Holy Ghost.

Chapter x.

UNITED PROVERBS.

IN this graphic chapter we have a number of extraordinary sayings, which some commentators have fruitlessly attempted to shape into unity. Bishop Ellicott says : " Commentators cannot be said to have been very successful in their attempts to trace a connection between the proverbs of this chapter. Perhaps nothing better can be said than that the common theme of these proverbs is the advantage of wisdom. It is forcing the connection to imagine that the enterprise from which the writer seeks to dissuade in ver. 8 is that of rebellion against the ruler whose error is condemned in ver. 5." I propose, therefore, to treat the sentences simply as sentences, without trying to weld them into a unity that seems to me to be unnatural.

" Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour : so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour " (ver. 1).

By dead flies we are to understand " flies of death," called in Psalm vii. 13 " instruments of death," and in Psalm xviii. 5 " snares of death." The meaning is that the flies were death-giving, or poisonous. It is enough, however, to take the expression as it stands in the English version, and in that case the dead flies are set in apposition to the man who is a fool, and his influence upon one who is in reputation for wisdom and honour : the sense would seem to be that a little folly undoes the effect of much wisdom. A Puritan commentator has well said : " A great many flies may fall into a tar-box, and no hurt done. A small spot is soon seen in a swan : not so in a swine. Fine lawn is sooner and deeper stained than coarse canvas." It is impossible, according to the finding of Coheleth, for a man to be all wisdom and all honour. The strongest man has his weak points. In the closest armour there is a crevice or a rent. No man is stronger than his weakest point ; and strange though it appear, the man's

weakness will often show itself more than his strength ; the little evil will seem to be larger than the great good, as one dead fly will cause a whole vessel of ointment to smell vilely. The fly is small, and the vessel is large ; yet the evil is more telling in its effect than the good. The ship in which you propose to cross the Atlantic is four hundred feet long, and her timbers are simply magnificent in quality and strength : her captain has crossed the sea scores of times ; but it is only right that you should know that fifteen feet below her waterline there is one rotten plank. Now go ! Will you ? Look at the difference in the proportion between the good and the bad in the ship. How can you hesitate ? It is not as if there were four hundred feet of bad timber and one sound plank in the vessel ; you are told distinctly that the vessel is good and sound throughout, with the exception of one solitary plank. Now go on board and face the Atlantic if you dare ! So it is with a man : he is learned, he is gifted, he is quite noted for his political and commercial capacity ; he has a clear eye, a large mind, and a power of dealing with complicated questions which has probably never been excelled ; he is prompt, punctual, direct ; there is no mistaking any word or tone that he utters : I have only to add, however, that he is gifted with the power of telling lies. Now go and do business with him ; trust your concerns to him ; put all your affairs into his keeping : listen to him, and be pleased with his eloquence if you can ! Why do you hesitate ? The ointment is plentiful, and the dead fly is but one,—why not go over to the man and assure him of implicit confidence and of zeal in every cause which he espouses ?

“A wise man's heart is at his right hand ; but a fool's heart is at his left” (ver. 2).

Says one, “He doeth his business discreetly and dexterously ; he is handy and happy at it.” We are not, of course, to regard this description as physiological, but as moral. The meaning is—the wise man's heart is right, the fool's heart is wrong. The fool cannot find his heart : it is not here, but there ; not there, but beyond ; not beyond, but somewhere else. The wise man knows his strength, has his heart within call of his conscience, keeps himself well under control, and when he is wanted for any worthy object of attack or defence there he is, and may be

relied upon with absolute confidence. With the fool it is not so; he is diffused; his strength is attenuated, it lies about him scattered and useless; he is going some day to get himself together, but he does not know exactly where to begin; he means to do you a good turn, but unfortunately you are dead and buried long before he is half ready to begin. We see this kind of helplessness everywhere—in church, in business, in household life. There are men perfectly innocent as to moral motive who are mooning all their days, never seeing things in their right magnitude, distance, and colour, but living a life of continuous misapprehension and mistake; they take hold of everything by the wrong end; they deliver messages upside down; they bolt and bar every door conscientiously, and leave the staircase window wide open; their motives are excellent, their innocence makes the whitest lamb ashamed of its depravity; yet they walk backwards, talk backwards, and go out of the world backwards. I know of no cure for them. "That which is lacking cannot be numbered." Yet they go along with society like a shadow. The child's riddle inquires, "What is that which goes with a carriage everywhere, and yet is of no use to it?" and the child's answer is, "Noise!" So these people go along with the daily progress of civilisation. We cannot tell why they live. Truly they cumber the ground. Yet God seems to spare them for some inscrutable reason of mercy. Speaking of the fool Junius says, "His heart is at his left hand," that is, he puts away reason and wisdom from himself, as for the most part those things which men dislike are put away with the left hand.

"Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool" (ver. 3).

We may read this verse in one of two ways—Every one who is a fool has his name written on his forehead and on his back; to everybody he says, Look at me, I am a fool. This is mournfully true. The fool cannot be concealed; we see what he is in his slouching walk, in his vacant stare, in his uncertain speech; there is a loose smile upon his face that shows how life to him is but a grin; his finger-joints are loose, and the muscles of his neck have lost their tension. Or we may read the verse otherwise, and rightly, I think—The fool saith to every man he meets,

You are a fool. It is often said that the lunatic thinks that all other people are out of their minds. This would seem to be the true reading of this verse. As the fool goes down the street he thinks he sees nothing but fools. In visiting an asylum I have been struck with this. I can never forget an occasion on which a poor woman, looking at a number of visitors, plainly intimated that she regarded them all with wonder and pity; she seemed to say to us—"Poor things! how dare you be left alone? It is sad to see so many persons bereaved of reason. Sad, sad sight!" So God lets us down easily. He gives to the soul some compensation, and he so rules the fancy that we often hug our atom of glass, as if it were a diamond of the first water.

Cheleth now calls our attention to two remarkable pictures :—

"Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth" (vers. 6, 7).

Now both these things would seem to be in direct violation of the law of cause and effect. This is the second time Cheleth has come across instances which show that there is confusion somewhere. These things should make men think of moral causes. There can be nothing so improbable as that folly should be set in great dignity. Given that possibility as a mere theory, to be judged altogether apart from facts, and there could be no difficulty as to determining against it. But look on the throne, and see folly crowned; look on the bench, and see folly in the judgment seat; look at the high places of the earth, and see how folly is honoured. Facts are against our fine theories of human nature. How do we account for this elevation of folly? It cannot be accounted for as a mere matter of detail; here again we are indebted to the Bible for its penetration; the Bible insists upon going to roots, causes, and origins, and everywhere it proceeds upon the awful but solemn and true assumption that the foundations of things are out of course. Cheleth says he has seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth. The importation of horses was a new thing in the reign of Solomon. The horse occupies a different place in Biblical history to that which it does in classical narratives;* hence the

* See note, *post*, p. 107.

surprise of Coheleth when he saw a servant upon horseback, and princes simply walking on the earth. We, ourselves, are accustomed to see servants on horseback. One would think it impossible that any good man can be poor, or that any intelligent man should have a difficulty in making a livelihood. Yet things are all upside down, as it were. Unquestionably it is most odd how money is distributed and how preferment is allotted. Over the wall there, in that sweet garden, where a poet might lodge, or a musician might dream new harmonies, there is a coarse and bloated man who lives only for himself, to whom God never speaks in dream or vision, and to whom a new idea would be a most unwelcome guest; to him the thrush comes without any welcome, and flies away without any regret. It has been quaintly said, "When a fool is set in dignity it is as when a handful of hay is set up to give light, which with smoke and smell offendeth all that are near: when the worthy sit in low place it is as when a goodly candle is put under a bushel." Cato said he had rather men should question why he had no statue or monument erected in honour of him than why he had. "A rich stone is of no less worth when locked up in a wicker casket, than when it is set in a royal diadem." We are told that in Persia at this day the difference between the gentleman and the slave is that the slave never rides, the gentleman never goes on foot; gentlemen buy, sell, confer, fight, do all on horseback. We must never forget, however, that a man is not necessarily a prince because he rides upon a horse, neither is a man servile because his poverty obliges him always to walk. More and more we must get rid of all the sophisms which attend our judgment of mere circumstances. Christianity teaches us where to find the man: Christ says, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth;" what a man is in character, motive, spirit, charitableness, that he is in reality, whether he live in the king's palace or in the peasant's hut.

"He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him" (ver. 8).

Instead of the word "hedge" read "a stone-wall." In the crevices of stone walls serpents have often their habitation. This matter of digging pits is frequently referred to in the Bible—"He

made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made" (Psalm vii. 15). "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein : and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him" (Prov. xxvi. 27). "Whoso causeth the righteous to go astray in an evil way, he shall fall himself into his own pit" (Prov. xxviii. 10). Pits were dug for the entrapping of wild animals in the Eastern lands, and were covered over, so that no suspicion of their existence might occur. It has been pointed out, indeed, that the pits might be so concealed that the very makers of them might be caught unawares. So with many of our own deep schemes, made for the injury or ruin of men. As to the serpent biting those who break through the stone wall or the hedge, experience and history have left no doubt. We might look for illustrations, for example, in the matter of health. It has been too often supposed that health is a condition which came and went by some arbitrary law, or that man could do what he liked with himself with impunity. All this has been destroyed by better knowledge. Let any man attempt to break through the hedge which is set around the preservation of health, and say whether a serpent will not bite him. One commentator puts the matter thus, as giving in his view the right sense of the passage : "He that seeks to overthrow the fundamental laws, and establish government of a commonwealth, and to break down the fences and mounds of sovereignty and subjection, shall no less (but much more) imperil himself, than he that pulls up an old hedge wherein serpents, snakes, and adders do usually lurk and lie in wait to do mischief." Even the serpent is thus used as an instrument of Providence. A marvellous use is made of all things in nature, whereby God testifies to his own presence and government in life. We often wonder why such and such creatures should be permitted to live : they are loathsome to our sight, they are ruinous to our property, they terrify us by night and by day, and our immediate instinct is to rid the world of such pests. Why did God ever create such lives ? Yet every one of them is of use in his government, though we cannot in our present circumstances explain this by obvious examples. Read the Old Testament through, and it will become wonderful to see what use God has made of beasts and insects in the punishment of evil. Perhaps we do wisely in regarding them all as symbolical of the higher instruments, by

which God will punish evildoing. A man may understand a hornet, when he cannot understand a moral appeal. Many a coward fears the lash who cannot enter into the mystery of legal interpretation. All nature is parabolical; what we want is the seeing eye, the hearing ear, and the understanding heart. All God's institutions are well watched; the executioner is immediately behind every one of them, and violence is followed by penalty. That is so in health, in speech, in credit, in social standing, in all the ways and relations of our complicated life.

All the confusions which we have read of in this book of the Preacher spring from a moral cause, and must be met by a moral remedy. No man will ever get his right social place until the conscience of the world is purified. Even the small honours and promotions which we have it in our power to give to one another will be misdirected and perverted, unless we be under the influence of right convictions and motives. And how do men reach the right condition of mind and heart? It is here that the gospel comes with its great answers.

NOTE.

"The most striking feature in the Biblical notices of the horse is the exclusive application of it to warlike operations; in no instance is that useful animal employed for the purposes of ordinary locomotion or agriculture, if we except Isa. xxviii. 28, where we learn that horses (A. V. 'horsemen') were employed in threshing, not however in that case put in the gears, but simply driven about wildly over the strewed grain. This remark will be found to be borne out by the historical passages hereafter quoted; but it is equally striking in the poetical parts of Scripture. The animated description of the horse in Job xxxix. 19-25 applies solely to the war-horse; the mane streaming in the breeze (A. V. 'thunder') which 'clothes his neck;' his lofty bounds 'as a grasshopper;' his hoofs 'digging in the valley' with excitement; his terrible snorting—are brought before us, and his ardour for the strife—

'He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage;
Neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet.
He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha!
And he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.'

So again the bride advances with her charms to an immediate conquest 'as a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots' (Cant. i. 9); and when the prophet Zechariah wishes to convey the idea of perfect peace, he represents the horse, no more mixing in the fray as before (ix. 10), but bearing on his bell (which was intended to strike terror into the foe) the peaceable inscription, 'Holiness unto the Lord' (xiv. 20). Lastly, the characteristic of the horse is not so much his speed or his utility, but his strength (Psalm xxxiii. 17, cxlvii. 10).—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

Chapter xi.

BREAD UPON THE WATERS.

"Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days" (ver. 1).

THE allusion in this verse has been considered to be to the Eastern method of sowing grain at the time of the overflowing of rivers. The husbandman is seen throwing his seed upon the waters in the hope that he will find it again in large harvests: the grain is not wasted; it is sown. In a certain sense, the man is engaged in a religious action, in so far as he loses his grain that he may find it, and he commits himself to the certain operation of laws which he neither originated nor can control; in other words, he falls into the system of things, and becomes part and parcel of it, and is in that sense a fellow-worker with God.

Another suggestion has been made: Throw your thin, flat, light cakes upon the water, and though they sink and you seem to get nothing back again, yet you do really get back very considerable results in the form of unselfishness and nobleness of temper. Do your charity hoping for nothing again. This suggestion may be critically correct, but the former is morally true, and is supported by a verse we shall come to presently.

"Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth" (ver. 2).

This verse would seem to teach the thriftiness and prudence of charity. It is profoundly true that charity should be done for its own sake, and is only well done when so done; yet even charity is not charity when it is unduly confined. You say, "Charity begins at home." Yes, the wise man answers, so it does, but give a portion to eight,—that is, to one beyond the family circle, to an outsider—for thou knowest not what evil

shall be upon the earth, and perhaps this outsider shall be thy best friend in the long-run. You are throwing oranges amongst the boys—very good ; it is genial so to do, and is much appreciated by your juvenile and clamorous clients. Now there is a little eager-eyed fellow looking on as a stranger, and getting nothing ; throw him one ; by-and-by that little fellow, when grown a man, will lead you over a place of danger because he remembers the time when you threw him a token of your good-will. We know not what we are doing. We may be making friends when we have no intention or purpose of doing so. In this, as in other things, it is the unexpected that always happens. If you have before you a project of business you may draw up a list of the friends upon whose patronage you may confidently rely ; nay, you may go further, and almost make out the invoice in the name of each, and so cast up the total of your obligation ; but when the business really begins you will discover that hardly a friend whose custom you anticipated has come to assist you, but instead thereof come quite a host of strangers, persons upon whose sympathy you had not reckoned, persons indeed who are totally strange to you ; and thus from the unexpected quarter you realise your greatest advantages. Do not operate exclusively within a narrow circle. There are good men beyond the lines which your sympathy has drawn or your imagination has dreamed. Wherever there is an opportunity of doing good, do it, independently altogether of all narrow and selfish considerations ; thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth, thou canst not tell from what quarter danger may come ; the beast of prey may be lurking behind the next bush, or may suddenly spring upon thee from an unseen hiding-place ; therefore live the broad, generous, unselfish life ; for here, as elsewhere, it is for ever true that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

“ If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth : and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be ” (ver. 3).

The clouds are not full of rain for their own sake, but for the sake of the earth. So we are not rich for ourselves, but for others, if the true heart, the Christ-heart, be in us. The rain, too, may come just when we do not want it ; and trees we prize much may be blown down, and there they will lie just where they fell, perhaps

across a beautiful flower-bed, or some furrow of promising wheat. So we work in the midst of commingling blessings and difficulties; the rain just what we need, or just what we do not want; the tree full of fruit in the morning, and torn down by a shattering wind at night-fall. Thus life is a continual discipline and a continual surprise. The sunny wall upon which you are training the peach-tree may fall down just when you have driven the last nail, and there you may stand, a monument of disappointment and despair. It is well to observe how many things there are beyond our control. Who can touch the clouds? Who can command the rain to fall at this hour or at that? Who can say to the descending shower, Thus much, and no more, shalt thou fall upon the earth? The tree, too, is beyond the strength of the man. This is humiliating, but instructive when properly considered. Who can carry away with him the oak of Bashan or the cedar of Lebanon? Other help he must call, for his own personal strength is unequal to the occasion. Thus we are set back continually, rebuked and humiliated, and taught that there is a limit to our proudest strength. We are not now talking of what a multitude of men can do, but of what one man can do. A multitude of men can easily remove the tree, but can all the populations on the face of the globe summon a star to appear, or turn back the tide of the sea, or command the wind in what direction it shall blow? If men would rightly consider the parable of nature, they would never be out of the sanctuary of God. All things are full of doctrine, philosophy, poetry, and consolation, when interpreted by the inspired mind.

“He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap”* (ver. 4).

That is to say, in doing your work you must not look at the

* “The tone of the Preacher becomes more that of direct exhortation, and he speaks in clearer and higher notes. The conclusions of previous trains of thought are not contradicted, but are placed under a new law and brought into a more harmonious whole. The end of man's life is not to seek enjoyment for himself only, but to do good to others, regardless of the uncertainties or disappointments that may attend his efforts (vers. 1-4). His wisdom is to remember that there are things which he cannot know, problems which he cannot solve (ver. 5), to enjoy, in the brightness of his youth, whatever blessings God bestows on him (ver. 9).”—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

mere inconveniences, hardships, and possibilities of failure, or you will never do any work at all. If you stand at the door and look at the clouds you will not get your sowing done in the field. A man says he will not go to church because he may slip down on the road and hurt his foot ; he will not take a railway journey because the boiler may burst or a wheel may take fire ; he will not open his window in summer because an insect may crawl in. There are people in the world exactly so foolish, though at first this may appear to be simply incredible. Make any proposition to them you please, and they will tell you what difficulties surround it, and what awful possibilities are ahead of it. Such people live in circumstances, events, occurrences, and their imagination is quick on the side of perceiving dangers and losses. These are not the people who should set themselves to lead the world. This will be admitted as a philosophy, and yet, strange to say, these are the people who hinder the progress of society more than any others. If they are not righteous overmuch, they are cautious overmuch. Perhaps they may have a mission in the world ; for if all men were courageous, enterprising, audacious, who can tell to what lengths the world might be driven ? But we are mingled and commingled together in a strange and often healthful way, so that the strong stimulate the weak, and the weak hold back the strong, and out of this interaction there may come some solidity of wisdom. The distressing point, however, is that men who observe the wind and do not sow, look upon men who sow and do not observe the wind as simply lucky or successful men, and call attention to their own poverty as indicating a harsh aspect of divine providence. When will men cease to lie against God ? Take it in this way : A man works night and day, spares no pains, lives that he may accomplish a certain purpose, and by the blessing of heaven upon his toil he carries that purpose to fruition. Another man is indolent, thoughtless, negligent, has no grasp of affairs, is wanting in the stimulus of operating principles of a pure and large quality, and that man comes to poverty, helplessness, and social contempt. What does he do ? He looks upon the other man and speaks of luck, good fortune, success ; says the wind bloweth where it listeth, and nobody can tell who will be successful and who will be unsuccessful. Talk like that should not be listened to, but

should be resented as involving a criminal reflection upon the law of industry and the corresponding law of success. There is a time to sow, and if a man neglect that time he is wrong, cruel, wholly unjust, in regarding the harvests of wiser men as indications of partial grace, or proofs of heaven's displeasure against himself.

"As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all" (ver. 5).

Work always. Do not spare your labour. The next time you sow may be the best time you ever had. Prosperity must be left to God. It is our place to be content with the work of sowing. Of course we want to see the seed spring up at once, and we think it ought to spring up here better than there, and God is always disappointing us in this expectation by giving us good crops where we look for nothing. "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit . . . so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all." You say, This enterprise must succeed; and, lo, it comes to nothing: you say, That other scheme cannot flourish; and, lo, it brings forth profit and honour to you more and more. This passage shows us what we know and what we do not know. We know the art of sowing, and we are called upon to exercise that art liberally and industriously and hopefully; the morning is to see the seed thrown upon all winds and carried to all corners of the field, and the evening is to be as abundant as the morning. There we know what we are doing; we know precisely how much seed we have sown, and we are responsible both for the time at which we sowed it and the quantity which we cast into the ground. Up to that point, how great is man, how wise, how skilful, how able to manage his own affairs! Alas! after that time his wisdom is like a lamp put out, and his strength falls down in utter helplessness. Man cannot tell what shall be the result of his sowing; there he must wait, and watch, and hope; perhaps, indeed, he may venture to pray: but his knowledge cannot carry him into the harvest-time, and assist him in reckoning up how large or small shall be the barn in which he shall garner his grain. Yet there is a gleam of hope running through the very uncertainty of this result—"Thou

knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." There is always room for hope in the industry and discipline of human life. Parents, hope about your children : you cannot tell but the most courageous and audacious boy may be chastened, and be enabled to turn his superabundant energy to gracious uses. Do not give up the stupid boy under the impression that it is hopeless to work upon an unpromising soil ; he may at last surprise you by resources wholly unexpected ; yea, he may come to be the brightest son in the family and the leader of the whole household. Leave the door open for the prodigal, for he may suddenly return, when the night is stormy and he is tired of the inhospitable wilderness. In delivering great messages of hope to mankind do not limit those messages as to their range of operation ; but preach them to all the ¹world, yea, to every creature under heaven : for thou knowest not who shall hear, or who shall forbear, or whether all the world shall listen and attend. We say morning is the time for work, and evening is the time for rest ; verily in such a world as this, and in a life so short and urgent, there is no time for rest ; even our holiday should be but a period of recuital, that we may do larger work when its sunny hours are past. How glad will be the surprise of many when they see the vast and golden harvest as the result of their honest toil !

" Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun : but if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all ; yet let him remember the days of darkness ; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity " (vers. 7, 8).

Let a man put this and that together. You cannot always be young. There is a time of darkness as well as a time of light ; but do not be anticipating the darkness, and thus turn away the blessings of the day : nor yet in the time of glory imagine that the brilliance shall continue for ever undimmed, for the days of darkness shall surely be many. Let us make the best of our opportunities. You will not always be energetic, able to travel many miles, to endure many inconveniences, to repel foes of every stature and form : adapt your energies to your labours and opportunities, knowing that the night cometh wherein no man can work. It is mischievous that we should deprive ourselves of immediate blessings because we are sure that days of darkness

will come. They will come soon enough; poverty may come, affliction may come, bereavement will certainly come, and as for death its coming is inevitable; but shall a man lose all the advantages of his youth because he is sure that at the end of half a century he will be frail, and will be lingering on the borders of the grave? He is not to allow that anticipation to becloud his life or to discourage his energies, yet he is to make such use of it as will chasten him and sober him, and invest him with that grave dignity which becomes men who have short lives and great responsibilities.

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity” (vers. 9, 10).

Let reflection save passion from madness. How, then, is the young man to remove sorrow from his heart and put away evil from his flesh? You have the answer in the whole of the twelfth chapter. Make friends early with God. Live a whole lifetime with God and for God. The time will come when you cannot be actively religious. You will always be able to enjoy religion, but the time of active piety will quickly fly away. Coheleth is not willing that youth should put on the airs and claim the immunities of old age. Whilst a man is young he insists upon his being young in the best sense of the word—in the sense of wise laughter, chastened merriment, high joy, exuberant spirits. Coheleth's young man is to be blessed with cheerfulness; he is to be rich in enthusiasm; he is to be wealthy with hope. But beneath all this, and above it and around it, there are to be certain religious reflections, which will not tame and humiliate, but chasten and ennoble the soul. Coheleth thus does not fear to enforce religious considerateness upon the young mind. How noble a spectacle is a young life of joy consecrated to the service of truth, eager in upholding the claims of all pureness and wisdom! There is no nobler sight in all the earth than consecrated youth, sanctified enthusiasm, exuberant joy, used as a stimulus in sacred service.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, thou dost work by a purpose far away from our imagination. We cannot follow thy way. We hear the sound of thy going in the great wind, but thou dost not leave one footprint behind. The clouds are the dust of thy feet. Behold, thou art shrouded in darkness and in light, and we cannot come near unto thee. We wonder, we look up, we wait, we adore. We are sure that we know but little, and therefore should speak but little. We know that there must be more to come. All we see is but a beginning, and we are not contented to accept it as a thing complete; it stirs our fancy, it excites our wonder. We know and are confident that all things are moving on to a sublime issue and to a divine completeness; and now we pray for patience to wait, and calmness to stand up and say, This is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good. We will not thrust our ignorance upon thy way, and display the vanity of our folly by criticising movements we cannot grasp; we will stand back a pace or two and let the Lord go forward, and we will hope that by-and-by we shall know what we know not now. Now we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away: we shall forget the seed-time in the harvest; we shall forget the night sleep in the morning joy, and because of newness of life we shall forget the pain and the weariness of death. We thank thee for all religious hopes, because they ennoble the soul, they constrain us towards a completer patience and a diviner charity; they are not sentiments only, lulling the mind and comforting with irrational consolation; they inspire the strength to deeds of daring; they impel the life in the direction of holy sacrifice for the good of others; they will not allow us to rest in indifference; they inspire us with courage to attempt still broader and nobler service: thus do they prove themselves to be of God; we will not silence their pleading voice, but let all thy gospels and messages sound in our hearts, giving us comfort and courage and hope, and making us noble in faith. Do thou meet with us as we gather together around the holy altar, and speak comfortably to our souls. Tell us just what we want to hear; speak the word we need the most. We shall know thy voice; there is none like it: thy tones shall fill the soul, thy music shall exclude from the ear all other appeals, and we shall rise from our contemplation and our adoration ready to face the world, whether it beat upon us in storm, or attempt to smile upon us as through a cloud. Rock the cradle; make the sick man's bed; spread a table for the hungry; and in desert places, scorched by heat, find cooling wells for weary travellers. Dry our tears when they hinder our seeing thy face; and let the gracious rain stream from our eyes when

through such waters we may the better discern 'thee. Our life is thine : make it long, short, rugged, even, what thou wilt ; but in the eventide may there be light, and in all the way of the soul may there be a movement towards the Cross ; in all the agony of penitence, in all the burning fever of shame, in all the distress of despair, may we have some inexpressible comfort arising from the desire at least to see Jesus and touch the Saviour. Then when the desert is passed, and the river is crossed, and winter is left behind, may we hail one another in the summer land, and be one for ever in truest fellowship of soul among the angels and the spirits of the just made perfect. These are our small prayers, our feeble cries, our narrow intercessions, but we hand them to the Saviour, the Priest, the Mighty Pleader, and he will make intercession for us, and complete our prayer with his own desire ; then shall our life be rich, and in our whole way there shall be a continual shining sun. Amen.

Chapter xii.

THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN.

NOW we come upon the exhortation which Coheleth addresses to the young man, and we have seen how high is his title to assume the office of teacher of youth. We are not about to listen to a preacher who has had no experience of the world. We cannot taunt this man, saying, "If you knew more, you would say less." Here is a man who knows the whole round of pleasure, a man who has drained every goblet of offered joy, and who comes to us from the market-place, from gardens of delight, from palaces of royalty, and gives us his exhortation. Let us listen to it, and be wise.

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them" (ver. 1).

You say you can remember things that took place forty or fifty years ago better than you can recollect what happened last week. There is a whole philosophy in that word. The memory is quick in youth. It seems made to take hold of things, and to keep them in firm grasp. What is it to the young mind to commit poetry to memory, to store the recollection with figures, words, terms, formularies ? That which is impossible to age is comparatively easy to youth. In this particular we may be said to enjoy in old age what we gather in early life. So we come to the strange fact that youth is not only a seed-time but a harvest-time, wherein we cut down many golden crops, and store them in

the granary of a faithful recollection, that we may have quiet and rich enjoyment in the time of old age and retirement ; then come up the youthful songs, then we drink over again the dew of the morning, and again and again we pluck and bind the sweet flowers of life's spring-time, and think there is none like them in all the gardens of old age. It is a pleasant illusion, but thus we are cheered and soothed and tempted down to the grave by easy but sure approaches. Amid all the recollections of our youth, the wise man would put first and foremost the Creator, not to make youth old, but to make old age young. In this case, if the last be made first, the first shall be made last ; and the evening hour will glow with warmth and be radiant with light ; the little child shall reappear in the old man—not to enfeeble and humble him, but to save his decay from gloom and despair. Remember now thy Creator, recognise his existence, set him at the front of thy thinking, connect the great scheme of life with his person and government ; do not start life under the impression that things make themselves, rule themselves, shape themselves, and that he who is strongest will get uppermost, without any regard to right. Observe what the word is. It is "Remember." It is not, Fear ; it is not, Tremble before ; it is not, Run away from ; it is sweet remembrance, vivid recollection, keeping God steadfastly before the vision of hope and imagination. Then remembrance is urged for what may be called cautionary reasons—"while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." Thus we are taught to look upon life as a whole, and to know the right time for doing anything. If a husbandman did not see the whole year, he would not know what to do with any part of it. If a builder did not know the climate of his country for a whole year, he would not know how to put up his edifice. It is one thing to build for a calm summer day, and another to build for a year that has in it winter as well as summer. The builder really puts up his building for the one day of storm that is to be in the year. Wherever the beam is solid, the iron is thick, and the roof is guarded at every point, we may be sure that the builder has foreseen the evil days—days of tempest and of danger. Who has not seen travellers proposing to undertake a certain journey, and forecasting the incidents of the way and the nature of the way itself ? For miles the road is

known to be smooth and easy, but for other miles it is also known to be rough, stony, and dangerous. For which part of the road does the traveller most carefully qualify himself? If these things are done upon the low levels of consideration and arrangement, what should be done in the higher ranges of religious preparation and spiritual forecast? Men who do not remember their Creator in the days of their youth may seek to remember him when memory has failed. You believe there is a Creator; you would not deny the existence of a Creator on any consideration whatever; therefore let me preach to you the solemn and awful doctrine that if you do not remember this Creator you will be judges against yourselves; for in theory you were religious, but in practice you were profane. Oh! be wise—may I not say?—be decent, be just, be fair, in your dealings with your Creator. He deserves all, he demands all, and only in giving him all we are and have do we realise the full possibilities of life, physically, socially, religiously, and in view of the solemn and endless future.

Cohemoth now gives a beautiful picture of the decay of manhood, —beautiful indeed, yet it may bring pain and tears to those who think what they are coming to:—

“While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain” (ver. 2).

All the great comforts contract and withdraw. Once your house had large well-kept windows through which the light streamed; but they are now dusty, weather-stained, and the morning is blurred and dimmed when it tries to get at you through so defective a medium. Is there a more pitiable object anywhere than the sun struggling with a thick, murky fog? It looks so white, as if it were weary with long watching and strife; so round and bare, like a king who has lost his robes and his crown, and of whom his subjects are ashamed. A white, watery, forsaken-looking thing, half wheel, half eye, trying to see and yet afraid to look, peeping behind the thick curtain with an eye without eyelids, a bleary and forlorn object altogether. Yet is there any change in the sun itself? No: the change is wholly in the *medium*. So life is as strong, as joyous, as songful as ever, but the days through which it shines are murky, fog-laden, and

shrunk to a mere span. Coheleth warns us to be ready against the time when life itself will be shorn of its power to give enjoyment and satisfaction. Many different interpretations have been given of this picture, but happily it is a picture which every man may interpret for himself, and apply to himself, without running any danger of opposing the spirit of its deepest meaning. Say that it applies to the body, say that it is a picture of old age, say that it depicts certain realities that must occur in every full-grown life, the moral comes to this, that there is in front of us a time of impoverishment, enfeeblement: a time when we are no longer our own selves, enjoying our full strength, exerting our complete energy; we are but part of ourselves, the rest we have buried in the long past. Coheleth would have us ready for that time of self-shrinking. His way of getting ready for that time is to think well of the Creator in early days, to be familiar with the principles of his government, with the objects of his rule, with the meaning of his providence, and with the infinite gospel embodied in the saving Cross. Why do we put off religious considerations until the last? Is this wise? Is this worthy of us? Need I do more than ask the questions? Do they not instantly bring with them their own answer—an answer of conviction and accusation to many, and an answer of thankfulness and consolation to not a few?

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (vers. 13, 14).

The Preacher had found all outward things to be vanity. Now, is it true that the world is vanity? or did Coheleth simply utter a sentiment heedlessly or in the spirit of revenge, because of his own personal disappointments? The world is vanity to the man who is morally wrong. Immorality spoils everything. The man's spirit is wrong, and therefore he takes a wrong view of everything he looks upon. There is a sense in which we bring everything into our own quality: to the mean man all things are mean; to the narrow-minded man all things are narrow; to the good man all things are beautiful or hopeful, or if he must admit the existence of evil he delights rather to magnify points of excellence which his own vivid imagination may suppose itself to have discovered. “To the pure all things are pure,” is a doctrine

which applies not only to spiritual relations and ministries, but to everything which constitutes part of the world. The pure man could hear language which to an impure man would contain all manner of baleful suggestion ; and yet the pure man could listen without a blush. The man who uses the world merely for the sake of gratifying his appetites will find it to be but vanity, simply because all lower appetites burn themselves out, and give up the quest of good, because they are satiated, and the very power of enjoyment is destroyed. An exhausted appetite thus passes judgment upon the world, and that judgment is unjust : if the world had been properly used, under intelligent discipline, it would have yielded very different results, but because it has been abused, the appetite which is exhausted by satiety turns round upon the world, and writes upon it a vengeful criticism.

But there is a sense in which the world is truly vanity. What is that sense ? It turns altogether upon the conception which is formed of man. It is the greatness of man that dwarfs the world. The cradle is adapted to the child of days, but it has no relation whatever to the man who has come to maturity. If a man should persist in carrying his cradle about with him, and contending that it is sufficient, that it once measured his necessities and therefore must continue to measure them, he would be condemned as insane. So the world was once enough for us ; we were delighted with its beauty, we were satisfied with its abundance, we sunned ourselves in the light which made it warm, and said, How truly joyous is the present sphere of existence. For the time being that judgment was right, because it exactly expressed the measure of our capacity ; but we have grown, we have become conscious of new powers, we have seen in the far distance outlines of realities which tempt our imagination, and lure us onward by a singularly fascinating power, so that now the things that are round about us appear to be small and unworthy,—not that they have changed their nature or uses, but because we ourselves have outgrown them. That which was useful to the child is useless to the man. That which satisfied us in our infancy is mere vanity now, and we cannot stoop to it, or for a moment tolerate it. So, then, a distinction must be made between the world and the men inhabiting it. For a time, the world was

large enough, yea, too large, but little by little we conquered it, saw all its surface, understood all its meaning, exhausted all its uses, and now to offer us that world in satisfaction of new aspirations is simply to mock our growing manhood.

What is it that will put everything right? Coheleth tells us in the thirteenth verse: "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." When you are right, the earth is right. "Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. . . . Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us." "Fear God"—not in any servile sense, as a slave might fear a master, but fear him filially, reverentially, with all the joy of purest love; then the mind shall be uplifted in nobler elevation, and the whole outlook of life shall be brightened. We know that we fear God when we keep his commandments; that is, we look out for the things that are written for our guidance and instruction; we study them; we do not try to pervert them, but to extract their obvious and deepest spiritual meaning, and then our holy endeavour is day by day to exemplify them in simplicity of motive and pureness of action. The whole operation is not to end in merely intellectual homage: a man might lift up his eyes to heaven, and his tongue might utter loud words of adoration, and the man might claim thereby to be "fearing" God,—yea, to be so fearing him as to pay no attention to discipline or to the detail of duty. If this is not hypocrisy, it is certainly sentimentalism or superstition of the most mischievous kind. Our awe of God ought to lead us to a deeper study of his word and commandment, that we may balance our homage by our obedience, and thus realise a complete and acceptable worship. If God has given commandments, where are they to be found? Here we are thrown back upon our old and well-established doctrine that we are not called upon to invent commandments for ourselves, but to obey those which have been laid down for us. We may begin with them as commandments, feeling all their hardness, and difficulty, and seeming impracticableness, but we are to comment upon them by endeavouring to carry them out; our exposition is to be in practical behaviour, not in daintily-chosen words or in felicitous phrases of commendation. Are we not to

live under command—that is to say, under the authority and order of the living God? When we come to know ourselves really, we shall find that it is simply impossible that we should invent our own commandments. That God himself is required to issue commandments for the guidance of human life is, when properly apprehended, a tribute to the greatness of that life: how intricate must be the machinery which only God himself can keep in order; how invaluable the life which he has created when only himself can sustain it! The commandments of God are indeed at the first grievous, because we have either lost the power, or the desire, or both, to do them; but after we have been inspired by the Holy Ghost, and trained in the uses of life, we begin to see that only in law is there true liberty, and only in obedience is there true harmony or rest. That which at the first seems to be arbitrary or mechanical is proved at the last to be moral and spiritual. We may begin under military drill, but we end in childlike obedience and love. It has been well said, “The Book of Ecclesiastes begins with ‘All is vanity,’ and ends with ‘Fear God, and keep his commandments.’” We begin at vanity, and never know perfectly that we are vain until we come to fear God and keep his commandments.

“For this is the whole duty of man,”—otherwise, “this is the duty of all men,” which is considered to be the only possible rendering of the Hebrew; the difference between the Authorised Version and this rendering being that the latter leaves nothing further to be done, whereas this literal rendering calls upon all men to do the same thing—namely, to fear God, and keep his commandments. I cannot recognise any vital difference between the two ways of putting the truth. It may be supposed that there is nothing evangelical in the exhortation to fear God and keep his commandments, but let any man try to carry out that exhortation, and he will soon feel his need of evangelical direction and support. We cannot know God except through evangelical methods, nor can we find our way into the secret meaning of his commandments but by the leading of the Holy Spirit. True, we may begin by a general conception of God’s creatorship, and may be religious in a deistic sense, but

God is a larger term than any one word which can be used in its definition : though God is one, yet there is also a sense in which God is many, that is to say, many in his aspects and many in his attributes ; and it is not given to every man to comprehend the total unity of God, and regard him under one term or figure. We speak of God as Creator, Sovereign, Father, Shepherd, Redeemer, Judge ; all this God is, and yet infinitely more ; but some men can only begin at one term, and pass gradually from the one to the other, until their spiritual education is completed. When we ask what it is to fear God, we begin to ask what God himself is, and to that inquiry there is no sufficient answer but that which has been returned by the Son of God, who dwelt in the bosom of the Father.

What is our great hope in view of all the strife, vanity, disappointment, tumult, and apparent failure of this world ? What of its injustice, its tyranny, its selfishness, its policy of might against right ? The answer is, "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." That is not a terror, it is a hope. Whilst bad men may read the words and tremble under them, good men should repeat them and take heart again. Men can deal only with actions, and can pronounce opinions only upon that which is superficial and obvious. God will deal with motives, with operations of the mind which are hidden from observation, with the secret thoughts and intents of the heart, and his judgment shall thus be complete in its justice. Let those who are conscious of being right maintain their confidence, however much appearances may be against them, and however much for the time being they may appear to be the sport of circumstances or the victims of oppression. The true judgment does not lie between points of conduct, but between qualities of motive. He who maintains a right cause, at what cost soever of time, money, strength, and reputation, shall in the long run be vindicated. Terrible beyond all imaginable disaster would it be if this world's history were to close without divine judgment. Assure the tyrant that there is no judgment beyond, and then he will strike more terribly and swiftly than ever he struck before. Tell the man of might that he may do what he pleases, and that he will

never be called to account ; and then say what measures may be set to his evil purpose. But it is the business of the Bible to declare that every work and every thought shall be brought into judgment, and that every man shall receive for the deeds done in the body, whether they be good or bad. We shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. There is a day of reckoning coming, and on that day the first may be last, and the last be first ; but whatever the order may be it will be established in righteousness, it will be determined by divine judgment of human conduct. What a reversal of position and fate will then take place ! How applause will be turned into denunciation, and how denunciation will be turned into applause ! All we can do in the meantime is to fear God and keep his commandments, study the law of God night and day, make it the man of our counsel, and the guide of our heart, and pursue all its injunctions to whatsoever issue they may lead. "Be not deceived ; God is not mocked : for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath ; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, and I will repay, saith the Lord." The Christian man ought to have no desire to take the law into his own hands ; his one object should be to live in God, to obey God, to love and serve God, and then to leave all consequences under God's disposal. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him : he shall bring forth thy judgment as the morning, and make thy righteousness clear as noon-day. God will vindicate the honest man. Let us leave our cause quietly and lovingly in his hands, for he will do more and better for us than we can do for ourselves.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we know thee as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the God of plagues and judgments. If we have shut our eyes to thy providence, we have not thereby dethroned and dismissed the Living One: thou art still working; the rod is still in thy hand, the blessing is still in thy heart. Clouds and darkness are round about thee; righteousness and judgment are the habitations of thy throne. Our song shall be of mercy and judgment. We will remember the goodness and the severity of the Lord, and our song shall be lifted up with fearlessness, as they sing who love, and they praise whose hearts are aflame with thankfulness. We will bless the Lord at all times: yea, his praise shall be continually in our mouth. We will say of the Lord, he is good; he is a Shepherd, a Father, a Redeemer, a strong tower to which we may continually resort. We will speak boldly of thee, with great, broad confidence, as those who know what they affirm, and who have lived the doctrine which they express. We bring to thee no broken song, no half praise, no reluctant homage and adoration; but a whole heart full of love, a memory charged with gratitude, and a soul which, having tasted the bitterness of sin and the pain of hell, would go out of the Father's house no more for ever. Thou dost bring the shadows of dying time around us; yea, every day time dies in the sunset, and eternity seems to open in the immeasurable darkness. Every day is a parable of duration; every day is a hint of thy method of working: thou dost make us young in the morning, strong and valiant men in the noonday, and then so gently dost thou bring in the calm eventide that we hardly know when the sun goes and the first star of silver gleams in the sky; then the great darkness, the unconscious sleep, the death for a moment, to be followed by resurrection; and so dost thou conduct us through undulating and ever-varying time, so that we might learn every day what we are, whither we are bent, of what we are capable, and feel upon us, now the warmth and stimulus of morning, and now the calm and solemnity of judgment. The years come and go, but thou abidest for ever, thy throne is the same; heavens grow old and earth sinks through very age, and the planet wheels take fire because of continued friction, and the whole upbuilding of the starry places falls into ruin; but thou art the same, thy years fail not, thou changest not, thy covenant is an unbroken bond, thy love an eternal oath. So we stand not in things that can be seen

and measured, and that must perish, but in the love of God, in the covenant of the Most High, in the Cross of Christ, in the intercession of the one Melchisedek. We bless thee for all the comfort we have enjoyed in the past, for all hints of thy grace, for all sudden gleamings of thy presence, and for the broad, calm, general providence which has often been mistaken for monotony. We mourn our sins, we cannot sponge out one of them, but the blood of Jesus Christ thy Son cleanseth from all sin, is cleansing sin out of the universe, and will cleanse it until the end cometh, when the universe shall be pure as heaven, and all men shall be anxious only to sing the songs of God. The Lord keep us the few remaining days of this little life. Save us from the folly of anxiety, from the atheism of despair; and though we have but a little while to live, and may all the time be rocked by the storm, yet may we measure nothing by time and so mismeasure it, but measure all things by eternity, and let all time things fall into their proper littleness. Amen.

Chapter i.

THE SONG OF SONGS.

“THE Song of Songs” means the supreme song, the very best song of the kind ever known or ever sung.* We have the expression “King of kings,” “Lord of lords,” indicating supremacy; supremacy, if it be possible, of a superlative kind; an undisputed and eternal primacy. The Hebrew delights in this kind of expression,—multiplication of words, even to redundancy of assurance. This is, therefore, not only a song, it is the Song of songs, the music of music; a high degree of that which is already immeasurably high. Yet there is not a religious word throughout the whole song. It is acknowledged to be a piece of secular literature by the most spiritual and evangelical annotators. The name of God does not occur in it, in any sense signifying adoration or piety. There is an exclamation which simply recognises the greatness of God, but from beginning to end the song is one of Eastern love, and is not to be forced into religious or spiritual uses. It may be accommodated by legitimate adaptation to such purposes; on the other hand, it may be regarded as the sweetest love-song ever sung, and it need not be made to do service in the house of the Lord at all.

* Canticles (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים, *Song of Songs*, i.e., the most beautiful of songs; ᾠδα ἀσματων; *Canticum Canticorum*), entitled in the A.V. THE SONG OF SOLOMON. No book of the Old Testament has been the subject of more varied criticism, or been more frequently selected for separate translation, than the Song of Solomon.—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

For a long time it was uncertain whether the song should be put in the sacred canon or not; so to say, it hung in the balance; a vote either way determined its canonicity. Here we find it, however, and there are certain things which we may see in it which may prove to be practical, useful, legitimate.

We are right, for example, in associating the idea of Christ's union with his Church as one marked by the tenderest love. There is a place for love in religion. This thought, now so commonplace, is nothing less than a revelation from the eternal God. The world has been used to awe, fear, veneration, prostration, abjectness of self-obliteration, in the presence of majestic or frowning heavens; enough of that the world has seen, with all its brood of superstition, ignorance, and uses of the most degrading kind; it was reserved for the Scriptures, as we regard them, a distinct revelation from the Father, to associate love with pity. Love is a child's word; it is indeed the word of a little child, of a bud-like opening heart. Yet it is a word which cannot be fathomed by highest intellect; it cannot be measured by most comprehensive vision. It is like the word God itself; it has become so familiar that we think we know it, yet with all our knowledge of it we cannot define it. Who can define "God"? or "Love"? or "Home"? or "Truth"? or "Life"? Yet these are the little words of the language. In very deed the little words are the great words. As we increase syllables we seem to lose meaning. There is no thought known to us worth having and worth using which cannot be stated in the shortest words. It would seem to have pleased God that it should be so. Collect all you know, and see how far the knowledge admits of being stated in words of one syllable: the chief of these, of course, is God; the next might be Man; but surely the word that binds these two is Love. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind." The fear is lest having become accustomed to this word we suppose that it did not require a revelation to disclose it. Point out in other sacred books the function of love. Does not love mean a measure of familiarity? May not love go where fear dare not venture? May not love make great prayers, whilst fear contents itself with sighing and

with trembling wonder? Does not love give boldness, courage, hope, confidence? May not love go higher than any other inquirer or worshipper? Many there are on the first step of the throne; some a little higher up; but what figure is that, highest of all, white-clothed, with a face all light, with an eye kindled at the sun? The name of that highest, purest, sweetest worshipper is Love. It is therefore not strange that there should be in the Bible even a book steeped in love, a soul sick of love, a heart without a dividing passion, a consecrated flame of affection. That such a book may be put to wrong uses is perfectly true; but what is there that may not be abused? What flower is there which a villain may not pluck and put upon his breast as a seal of honour? What bird is there which the cruellest hand may not kill? What word is there in all speech which a perverted imagination may not use for immoral or corrupting purposes? The Song of Solomon sanctified is a necessary element in the constitution of the Church's work. Every syllable of it is needed,—not perhaps as Solomon used it, but as it may be used by a heart sanctified and sweetened by the grace of God. There comes a period in the history of the Church when it must have all signs, figures, emblems, charged with meanings that the heart wishes to convey,—yea, cypher signs which only the heart itself can make out in all their profound and tender significance.

We are right in thinking of Christ himself as the cause or origin of all this love. "Draw me, we will run after thee" (ver. 4). There is a drawing force in life, a gracious impulse; not an impulse that thrusts men forward by eager violence, but that lures them, beckons them, draws them, by an unspeakable but most mighty magnetism. "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." Observe the difference between the words to draw and to drive. It is the special function of love to attract, to fascinate, to shut out all other charms, and to fix the vision upon itself; and under that sweet compulsion men will dare any peril, face any darkness, traverse any distance, though the road be lined by ravenous beasts. "We love him because he first loved us." God does not ask from us an affection which he himself has not first felt:

the love is not on our side, except as an answer ; the love is on God's part, as origin, fountain, spring, inspiration. "God is love." If God were only "loving" he might be something else—a mixture, a composition of elements and characteristics : God is more than loving, or he is loving because he is love. We say of some men, They are not musical, they are music ; they are not eloquent, they are eloquence. In the one case you would but describe a feature or a characteristic ; in the other you indicate an essence, a vitality, an individualism bound up with the thing which is signified. This love may be resisted ; this drawing may be put aside. We may say even to him who is chiefest among ten thousand and altogether lovely, We will not have thee to reign over us ; we have made up our minds to turn the day into night, and the night into one horrible revelry, and we would not have thy 'presence amongst our orgies and supper or feast of hell. Thou wouldst plague us ; the feast would turn to poison under thy look or touch ; so we banish thee, and enclose ourselves with evil spirits, that we may make night hideous. A tremendous power is thus given to man. He could not be man without it. Every man has the power to leave God, but no man has the right to do it. Am I asked what is this drawing ? Hear the apostle when he puts the inquiry, "Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering ; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance ?" Do not mercies break thee down in tears ? Does not daily kindness penetrate thy obstinacy, and turn thy stubbornness into prayer ? This is an appeal which is manifest, and not merely sentimental. The appeal is founded upon the goodness of God, and the goodness of God is the common story of the day ; it begins to be seen when the dawn flushes the awakening earth with earliest light ; it grows with the growing sun ; it burns visibly and comfortingly in the setting day ; all night it breathes its whispered gospel upon the heart of man ;—it is written on the front-door of the house ; it is inscribed on every window-pane through which the light comes with its needed blessing ;—it is in every loaf, turning it into sacramental bread ; it is in the cup, stirring the contents into holy wine, as sacramental blood ;—the goodness of God was at the birth of the child, rocked the cradle of the child, watched over the growing life of the child,

and will never forsake the advancing life, unless indeed that life shall grieve the Spirit, and quench the Holy Ghost. Doth not the goodness of God lead thee to repentance—charm thee, lure thee, fascinate thee? It was not meant to be a providence only, but a gospel; a gospel speaking through Providence; a great spiritual revelation incarnating itself in the house and home, and bread and garments, and all that makes life substantial and enjoyable. Where men do love the Son of God they are the first to acknowledge that their love is only an answer; they say, We love Christ, because he first loved us; when his love began to operate we cannot tell; we have searched into the history of this Man Christ Jesus, and we read that he was slain from before the foundation of the world; and verily that is true, for all his love comes to us with an impress of venerableness, a touch of eternity, a mystery not time-bound; it must be a love ancient as the duration of God.

This is what is meant by it being "all of grace." It never occurred to the heart of man to seek God or to love God. Who can love omnipotence? Who can love omniscience; or who can love ubiquitousness, omnipresence—a mere occupation of space? Love does not answer such ideas; there may be a bowing of the head, a closing of the eyes, a wondering of the imagination, a standing back as from an intolerable glory; but love does not know that sphere, love does not speak that language. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son": now we begin to feel a new emotion, there is upon our arm a human touch; there is mingling with our fellowship a human voice; there is a shrouded Deity, a concealed God. "Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." Accompanying that revelation there is a drawing power, and having been once drawn we wish to be closer still; our cry every day is, Draw me: there is another height to be conquered, there is another land to be seen, there are other gardens growing with all the fulness and odour of the paradise of God: draw me, and I shall not see the danger; draw me, and I shall fly where I cannot walk. This is the ministry of grace; this is the ministry of providence; this is that spiritual ministry which operates without bound or time or space—the very ghost of life; the spiritual action that invests even matter itself with a strange sacredness.

So far, then, we are right in associating this Song of Songs with the worship of Christ, with the love of God, with the right cultivation of those affections which make not men only, but religious or spiritual men.

We are right in thinking that vital union with Christ is associated, not only with joy, but with supreme joy—"We will be glad and rejoice in thee": we will be glad with gladness, joyful with joy. This is more than Hebraistic amplification of words; this redundancy is necessary to the expression of our emotion. There is a joy which seems to be spread over all living things; but our gladness must be higher than that transient rapture; we must have a rational joy, an intellectual gladness, a spiritual realisation of ecstasies that lie beyond language and form. We are to "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." So the Greek can be as redundant as the Hebrew; it is not any one language that thus speaks, but the heart that talks, and when the heart takes to speech how rapid, urgent, impetuous, ecstatic is the eloquence! Herein the Church is not like the academy or some school of pedantic criticism, where words are measured, and where conciseness is often considered a supreme virtue; the heart wants all things to help it in its unutterable utterance; yea, it would have the floods clap their hands, it would have the hills leap up in holy dancing; yea, it would ask the sea to roar in its fulness, and infuse into the lofty song the needful bass. When the spirit of man is in high religious rapture—not lost in fanaticism or folly—he asks for organ and harp and trumpet and instrument of ten strings, and constitutes the universe into an orchestra, and says, Now begin the mighty thunder; call the everlasting doors to lift up their heads, and the eternal gates to fall back, that the King of Glory may come in. Let us beware of a cold religion, a religion of paper and mechanism and arrangement; a religion that begins, continues, completes itself, and ends in frigid decency. Religion is nothing without enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is nothing without sacrifice; across everything must lie the sign of sacrifice; the image of the Cross must have its shadow on the sun; yea, it must throw a mournful, yet tender, yet hopeful, significance upon all creation. The Church has lost enthusiasm. We have joy, but it is

regulated joy ; a joy that is set down in the calendar ; a joy of feasting that is appointed for us by external and unapproachable authority ; but if we were true to the passion, the inspiration of love, we should say, "Thy love is better than wine . . . thy love more than wine." These expressions we find in the opening of this song ; we find in the second verse, "Thy love is better than wine" ; we find in the fourth verse, "We will remember thy love more than wine" : let "wine" stand for the highest earthly exhilaration or joy. The love which we are to feel towards Christ is not only to be joyous, but supremely joyous ; when we have ascended the whole line of earthly love we then, so to say, take wing and become distinctively joyous in Christ ; up to that point we have had a common joy with man, and bird, and beast, and every fair thing that lives in all God's ample house called creation, but at a certain point we begin to separate, to enter into the peculiar joy, the special rapture, and if in that high ecstasy we are alone, having left behind us all meaner choristers, yet we are not alone, for the Father is with us. Have we a supreme joy ? Does the Sabbath Day brighten over the whole week like a sun beaming its blessing upon every other day with encouraging benevolence ? Is the church the largest house, the highest, brightest house, the house that encloses all our little dwellings, and makes them, as it were, nests in the altar of God ? Have we lost enthusiasm, joy, madness ? Are men no longer beside themselves for Christ ? Or have they sacrificed everything to rigid uniformity, to a scheduled bill of particulars, by which they take their motion day by day, and by which they measure their worship ? In the New Testament there is no mere duty. Duty is a cold military word, which has been displaced by Love—hot as the heart in infinite pity, and spontaneous as all the blessing in which God himself lives. Let us compare ourselves with Christ, who for the joy that was set before him endured the Cross.

We are right in thinking that the love of Christ is connected with a certain quality of personal character. In the fourth verse we read, "The upright love thee." Whatever may be the varying translation of that word "upright," we seem here to touch a religious chord ; here at all events is a moral line.

"The upright love thee." Where the character is perpendicular there is a corresponding affection for Christ. The upright seek thee, are lonely without thee, cannot live without thee. God has always put his finger upon character, and marked it as his own when good, and written it all over with condemnation when it was self-seeking and evil.

We are right in thinking that the love of Christ does not blind us to our personal defects—"They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept" (ver. 6). Here is an acknowledgment of personal shortcoming, neglect, unfaithfulness; and yet the love of Christ is not suspended or withdrawn. Were God to withdraw his love from us because our prayer was short or meagre, because the day was marked by neglect, because we sometimes, in a cowardly spirit, evaded duty, who could live before him? Where sin abounds grace doth much more abound. Some can say, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee: though but yesterday I denied thee, though but a week ago I played the coward, traitor, blasphemer, yet deep, deep down in my heart is a passion which the sea cannot drown. I love thee, thou Son of God! Who does not know that mixed experience,—hating oneself, yet loving Christ; doing the forbidden thing, yet turning to the forbidding God with a look all tears, a sigh that trembles with contrition, and a consciousness that within us is the seed of God which cannot die? Have we this love? The signs will be clear: "Perfect love casteth out fear": "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren": "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" Beware of the mere sentiment of love; the flower is more than the fragrance. What did Christ's own love lead him to do? let that be the standard. O Saviour of the world, thou didst love us: what did thy love lead thee to do? Hear the answer given in the Scriptures: "He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor"; he "gave himself for our sins"; he "went about doing good." These are the standards: can we set ourselves beside them, and abide the result? A love that is nothing but song is no love at all. A love that expires in rapture never began in reason. If we have the love of God within us,

then shall there be in us the mind "which was also in Christ Jesus : who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God : but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men : and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name : that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth." The joy came after the sorrow ; the joy was the blossom of the root of sorrow. If we have not known the same sacrificial love, we shall never know the same triumphant joy. Who shall know the power of the resurrection of Christ ? Hear the apostle : "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." If we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him.

NOTE.

"Much of the language of the Song of Solomon has been misunderstood by early expositors. Some have erred by adopting a fanciful method of explanation, and attempting to give a mystical meaning to every minute circumstance of the allegory. In all figurative representations there is always much that is mere costume. It is the general truth only that is to be examined and explained. Others, not understanding the spirit and luxuriance of Eastern poetry, have considered particular passages as defective in delicacy, an impression which the English version has needlessly confirmed, and so have objected to the whole ; though the objection does not apply with greater force to this book than to Hesiod and Homer, or even to some of the purest of our own authors. If it be remembered that the figure employed in this allegory is one of the most frequent in Scripture, that in extant Oriental poems it is constantly employed to express religious feeling, that many expressions which are applied in our translation to the person belong properly to the dress (ch. v. 10, 14 ; vii. 2), that every generation has its own notions of delicacy (the most delicate in this *sense* being by no means the most virtuous), that nothing is described but chaste affection, that Shulamite speaks and is spoken of collectively, and that it is the general truth only which is to be allegorized, the whole will appear to be no unfit representation of the union between Christ and true believers in every age. It may be added, however, that it was the practice of the Jews to withhold the book from their children till their judgments were matured."—ANGUS'S *Bible Handbook*.

Chapter i. 5.

I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon."

BLACK, BUT COMELY.

THE blackness was caused by the look of the sun—"Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me"* (ver. 6). The image is a very striking one. Not only did the sun glare upon the observer, but it was like the brilliant eye of a bird of prey, looking down from some great height upon that which it proposed to seize and destroy. The text is wholly Oriental in its figure, and has been thus rendered—"Dark as the Kedareen tents of black goat's hair, beautiful as the royal pavilions with their rich hangings." The passage may be so adapted as to bring into view the twofold quality of human nature as revealed in the Scriptures: in one respect black enough; in another respect comely beyond all other loveliness. This would be fanciful and doubtful if the verse stood alone; but it does not. Throughout the Bible this doctrine is presented as the true view of human nature, namely, "black, but comely." The whole Bible preaches with unity this fundamental and sacred doctrine. To force this particular text into this particular meaning would be unjust to the writer of the song; but the contrast is so established and elaborated and illustrated by other parts of the Bible, that it becomes legitimate to seize this beautiful expression as indicating in very graphic terms the reality of the aspect which we present to heaven as men, namely, "black, but comely." Let us see if this be not so, and in order to make the doctrine the more apparent let us set, as it were, side by side man's view of himself and God's view of man as man is in Christ Jesus, and in the whole purpose and scope of grace divine. The first speaker should be man. What says he? Listen: "Behold,

* See note, *post*, p. 142.

I was shapen in iniquity ; and in sin did my mother conceive me." There is a recognition of the blackness of human nature. Let the second speaker be God himself. What does he say ? Listen with still more steadfastness and reverent attention : " Thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty : for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God." Setting these two testimonies side by side, what have we but a variation of the text, "Black, but comely" ? Let man speak again, "Woe is me ! for I am undone ; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." That indictment is severe enough ; there is no line of self-exculpation in it. Let God reply : "Lo, this hath touched thy lips ; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." Once more, set these two quotations, both from the prophecies of Isaiah, side by side, and we have the text in another and striking form, showing how true it is that man is "black, but comely." Let man again state his own case, "O wretched man that I am ! who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?" Is there any deliverance possible ? Is it always with man to be in a state of bondage and humiliation and infamy ? Let God reply : "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." So the testimony is not all upon one side. There are two aspects of human nature. We must take both aspects into our view, if we would form a just judgment of the case as God regards it. Let man speak again : "The law of sin which is in my members,"—a blackness I cannot get rid of ; I cannot wash out the stain ; if I relieve the surface of its deepest colour all the flush of darkness returns suddenly and completely. Let God reply : "The Lord hath put away thy sin." When God puts away a man's sin, who can find it ? God says he will cast our sins "behind" him. Behind the Infinite ! who has ever ventured into that locality ? Once more let man utter his moan : "I am carnal, sold under sin." It is as if Christ heard that voice, and could not be silent under its appeal, for the passage which we next quote would seem to be a reply and a gospel rejoinder : "Son, be of good cheer ; thy sins be forgiven thee." Is man yet done with the utterance of his lamentation ? He speaks yet

again: "I am a sinful man, O Lord." Let God reply from heaven as to his view of the Church when it has undergone the whole process of Christ's purification and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair." Man has still another speech to make. It is wonderful what variety of expression may be given to the deepest convictions; such convictions seem to create their own language; whilst the one of contrition and self-abhorrence would seem to be one, yet if we listen attentively how rich and varied is the passion of the tone! Listen: "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Hear the Lord: "Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee." Jesus Christ will purify unto himself "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." Let the greatest Christian that ever lived speak, and even in his tone we should find contrition, penitence, self-despair: "In me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing." Now for other words, "Perfect in Christ Jesus"; "Holy and without blemish"—sanctified, body, soul, and spirit: the miracle completed.

Is there no encouragement along this treatment of the subject? Does not the line lie in pleasant places? Man never yet complained justly and sincerely of himself without eliciting from God a corresponding reply: Hope thou in God; he will find water for thee in the desert; when thy way is blocked up with solid rock he will melt the stone or powder it, that thou mayest pass straight on to thine appointed destiny. Do not let us rest in the narrow and cold prison of our own shame and penitence and self-abhorrence. We might listen unto ourselves until we fell into complete despair. We are not to dwell upon the "black"; we are to look towards the "comely"; we are not to listen to ourselves beyond a given point, or our own voice of accusation will drive us mad: we must be still, and listen to Christ's appeal. A passage like this entitles us to look at the best aspects of our nature and circumstances. Dwell upon the second part of the text, saying again and again, as if repeating the refrain of a song—"but comely"; weak, but strong. Hear how beautifully the two views have been put together in some of the apostolic statements: "Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen

the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" See again what a contrast is here—"The poor of this world," but "rich in faith." Hear the Apostle Paul: "As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."

So, then, no undue strain has been put upon the text. If at first we seemed to employ it as a mere accommodation, the choice, for this purpose, has been amply vindicated by the citations which are before us. It would seem from beginning to end of the Bible as if there were two selves in every man; two distinct aspects of character; two voices always pleading within the court of conscience, memory, and imagination. Blessed is he who listens to the clear voice of heaven—to the hopeful gospel voice. Yet in order to hear that voice in all its distinctness we must first hear our own in all the bitterness of its lamentation, in all the poignancy of its moaning: the comeliness comes out in contrast to the blackness, and we must not spoil the contrast by removing one of the elements needful to it. Again and again must we remember that we shall not know grace until we have known sin; we shall have no ear for the gospel until we have been deafened by the thunders of the accusing law.

How, then, stands the case as presenting a contrast? It may stand thus: a man may say, I had a body, a physical frame; but that body seems to be but a sphere in which pain can have all its own way; at best it is a dying body, at best I am but a leaseholder, and the lease is running out most rapidly; nay, I can hardly call myself a leaseholder, for were I such I could lay claim to a certain definite period of time; I am rather a tenant-at-will, I may be dismissed to-morrow. So a man might moan about his body; but the text, and all the collateral passages which are before us, entitle us to say, We have a body, but we have also a soul; whilst looking at the one we become melancholy, we hardly care to live; all life is shadowed by a coming tomb. A melancholy figure at the end of life throws its adumbration upon all the path we tread, and we walk through darkness: that is

one view ; but we must not give way to that unhappy spell ; at best that view is only a half truth ; we must be encouraged to look at the other aspect : there is a voice which tells us that we are not all body ; we are mind, we are spirit, we are will ; we were made in the image and likeness of God : "Dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul." How many men need this encouraging voice to be all day ringing in their ears ! So prone are they to take the dark view, and to yield to all fleshly burden and temptation and difficulty. It is the business of the Church, of all its gospel ministers and gospel services, to cheer them, to present the large view, to introduce the light. So a man might say, Why should I live ? I am more localised than the birds of the air ; they can fly, I can only walk ; where I stand before a river unable to cross it the tiniest bird that flutters its weak wing can fly over the stream, and would seem in doing so to mock my feebleness. I am a prisoner of space ; I feel the burden of space ; I would willingly give up this spark of consciousness that I might have rest in forgetfulness. So a man might talk. A man talking so is on the highway to melancholia or suicide. Is there no other aspect ? You are localised, but you have imagination—that wondrous faculty which creates new heavens and a new earth, in which dwelleth righteousness ; that divine power that knows no limit. There is no searching of the capacity of an inspired and purified imagination ; even shadows are wrought into the wizardry of its parabolism ; even pain, weakness, suffering—these are dragged on its chariot-wheels, and made to grace the day of its festival. We have not yet used our upper selves ; we have been content to be kept down, humbled, scorned, degraded. What a feast we might have had of reason ! What intercourse with all the higher spirits that minister subtly and invisibly in all the economy of life ! What a forecast of destiny we might have enjoyed ! We might have been in heaven ! There is no reason why even now men should not mingle with the white-robed saints in light, with the sons of the morning : what little drawback there is to this high banqueting is but a reminder that yet we have to encounter the last foe, and throw him in the final wrestling. It is again the business of the Church, and all its ministers and services and functions, to bring men to see the larger view, to draw them away from dwelling mopingly upon

the blackness of the case, that they might see somewhat of the comeliness and loveliness and brightness and glory with which God has enriched the universe. By a right exercise of mind and will and imagination the poorest man may roll in wealth—not factitious wealth, but real spiritual wealth; the wealth that will enable him to forget poverty, and hunger, and difficulty, and suffering. There is a possibility of being so spiritually elevated, morally ennobled, as to forget the pain that otherwise would distract the attention and kill the body. When we commune with God we forget all labour, all toil, all pain. There are transfiguration days even in our poor little life, when we see Moses, and Elias, and Christ, and heaven. To realise one such day enables a man to come down into the common week, and fight all its beasts, all the lions that can be let loose upon it, for the power of God rests upon his soul. So a man may talk about his ignorance. How little the best man can know; he may say, The wisest man is but a variety of a fool; what can the keenest mind discern? We cannot see into to-morrow; we may put a finger upon our eyes, and thus block out the sun: we are always correcting ourselves; the science of to-day is corrected by the discoveries of to-morrow. We live at best a life of varied ignorance—now in full tide, now receding, but still the action is tidal, and we can hardly tell whether the tide is coming in or going out. So a man may talk, but in so talking he would but express his folly; whilst there is no doubt a distinct limit to intellectual attainment, is there not a sphere called by the mysterious, yet well-understood, name of faith? When men count their senses, they should make faith a kind of sixth sense. The five senses can go but a little way, and they walk so tremblingly and hesitatingly, as if they would wish to return and enjoy the security of their own ignorance; but faith goes out at night-time; the darkness and the light are both alike to faith; faith finds a hand in the black night, and clings to it, not with despair, but with trust and love, and passion of thankfulness and devotion. Faith says, I cannot answer your questions, but I feel and know that your questions are vain; I have no elaborate explanation to give of myself, but I feel in myself rational, because moral, satisfaction. Lord, increase our faith! Believest thou that I am able to do this? Be it unto thee according to thy faith.

Then the text should rebuke those who see only the black, not only in themselves but in other people. We are not only black, we may be comely. Hear the wondrous words of the prophet Obadiah: "Thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress. Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; yea, thou shouldest not have looked on their affliction in the day of their calamity, nor have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity." But that is the day when some men will be rude to us. They delight to look upon our distress; they find a kind of cruel enjoyment in seeing us writhe in our speechless agony: they want to see how we bear the pain, how we endure the yoke, how we take to the new discipline of poverty. There are times when men should not look upon us in any sense of criticising us or endeavouring to estimate our quality; they should be tender; they should be marked by the spirit of reserve; they should turn aside that we might at least spend some moments in solitude when we wrestle with our most poignant agony. But who can shut out curiosity? Who can refine the demon of vulgarity? Who can keep at bay the beast that longs with thirst insatiable for our destruction and ruin? Do not gloat over the blackness of other men. Do not whisper in deadliest criticism concerning their faults and their slips and their misadventures in life. Do not suppose that God is deceived by whispering, as if by lowering our voice to a whisper we were really not speaking about the thought at all, when in stern reality we are speaking of it with the strongest emphasis. In such a case a whisper is our power. "Thou shouldest not have looked on their affliction in the day of their calamity." How few people know how to treat others in the day of calamity! how fond they are of reproach! how mocking is their tone! how cruel is their very countenance! they do not understand the aching human heart. But we are not left to one another. "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?" Is there no one who understands this double nature, this wrestling and struggling going on always within the human life? Yea, there is One who knows it all: "We have not an high

priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." He knows what is in man; he watches the daily fight. At last which shall be uppermost? Let each man answer for himself in the fear and strength of God. What shall it be at the last—"black," or "comely"? That is the question. Has my will anything to do with answering that great inquiry? Certainly. God proposes to reason with men. He pleads constantly with erring ones; he comes down to those who are lost in lamentation, and speaks comfortably to them; he says, "For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee." When Jacob says, "My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God," he says: No; I have been watching thee in all the darkness, and at the last thou shalt be more than conqueror. Let us then not fail or give up heart or cease the godly struggle. He who fights that he may win Christ shall surely win the Son of God. "Fight the good fight of faith." "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." "He that endureth to the end shall be saved." The day cometh when the blackness will be forgotten, and the comeliness shall be sealed with immortality.

NOTE.

"Kedar, the second son of Ishmael and founder of one of the most distinguished tribes of Arabia (Gen. xxv. 13, 16). The word Kedar signifies 'black,' and the tents of the tribe, like all those of the Bedawin of the present day, were black (Cant. i. 5); hence some have supposed that the name was given to the tribe because of the colour of their tents. Others think that the name originated in the darkness of their complexion (Bochart, *Opera*, i. 216). This is all mere conjecture. The name was first borne by the son of Ishmael; but whether it originated, like that of Esau, in any peculiarity in the child, or in any event in his after life, we cannot tell. The tents of the nomad tribes of Arabia are black, and the colour of their skin is uniformly of a light bronze hue, so that the name Kedar was in these respects no more applicable to one tribe than another. The 'children of Kedar' (Isa. xxi. 17) were well known to the Israelites, and are more frequently spoken of in Scripture than any of the other Arab tribes. . . . They were also celebrated as warriors. Isaiah, when foretelling their fall, says, 'All the glory of Kedar shall fail, and the residue of the number of archers, the mighty men of the children of Kedar' (xxi. 16, 17)."—KITTO'S *Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature*.

Chapter i. 8.

"Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents."

THE SAFETY OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

WHAT would you say to a little child who had gone forth with his mother and brothers and sisters to see some great and exciting spectacle in the streets, and had wandered away from his guardians and companions, and had become lost in the crowd? In what speech would you address him? You would say to the little vagrant, You should not have left us, you should have kept close beside us: did I not tell you not to go away from me? why did you not take hold of me, and then you would not have been lost? And your speech, not angrily but pathetically spoken, would probably leave a happy impression upon the mind of the young offender. What would you say of a man who appears in the bankruptcy court, and concerning whom it is discovered that he set aside all precedents, all the acknowledged and established canons and laws of business, and separated himself wholly from all that had ever been done in the business world? This would be your speech: Foolish fellow, what else could he expect? he never acted as any other person did; he despised all that had been tested in the commercial circle: he took the whole case into his own wild head and wild hands, and it has come to this: anybody with a head upon his shoulders could have foreseen the short gallop into this bitter ruin. Your speech would have sense in it. Few wise men would attempt to gainsay it.

What would you say of a man who never took anybody's advice upon any subject that ever occurred to him? You would say, He is a genius, or a fool. These inquiries and illustrations give us the solemn teaching of this text. Keep on familiar ground; do not stray away from the line of footsteps; be near

where you can hear the pipe, or the flute, or the trumpet of the camp. Do not go away upon barren rocks and into dreary sands. Do not detach yourselves from the great company of the Church, but, wherever you are, see that your method of communication is in good working order: if you go a mile away, be sure you leave the road open that you can return to the main body in the event of danger surprising you in your loneliness, or pain befalling you in the silence and helplessness of your solitude. Of course, if it can be proved that you are a genius, then take the license of genius; but first let the case be twice proved; do not take the very first impression that may be given to you of your inspired and infallible genius; rather suspect the flatterer than flatter yourself.

If it could be proved once, twice, and again, and six times over, that you are an appointed herald of God to go away on lonely seas and up inaccessible mountains, make your calling and election sure. But to the rank and file, to the commonalty of the Church, we say: Let us go forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed our kids beside the shepherds' tents: let us not lose the benefits of community and companionship: forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is: do not attempt the genius if you have only the name and not the fire.

There is some need that this occasional word should be spoken, when every man is determined to strike out his own path in religious thinking. I repeat, I have nothing to say to some few daring prophets, who seem to be called to wildernesses far away, and to make lonely roads over towering and barren rocks; wherein they fulfil their election, strength and comfort will be given to them from heaven: but, speaking to the general company of the Church, I stand by the general exhortation of the Church. Nor is this the exhortation of fear; it is the precept of sense; it is the dictate of reason; it is the calm, strong, solemn view of history and experience.

Let us imagine that we go into a foreign land—any party of six. We cannot speak the language: we go in a small band that we may keep one another in countenance, and in various ways

supplement and cheer one another. But there is suddenly developed amongst us a daring genius. One of the six is absent. Where is he? No information can be obtained. An hour passes, and still he does not appear. We want to go, we cannot move comfortably without him. Another hour, and two more, and the eventide comes and it is night, and still the genius arrives not. But see, yonder he comes—he went out nearly six feet high, he comes back little more than five. He went out comparatively young, he comes back all aged and worn. Where have you been? “Been? do not ask me.” But what have you been doing? “Why, like a fool, I strayed away down there, and I could not ask my way back again, for I did not know a word of the language: I made signs, and pointed this way and that way, and have wandered miles and miles. Pity me, forgive me—you will never lose sight of me again until we return to our native land.” It is even so in the Church. There are persons who go off alone, that never tell where they are going: they know nothing of the language of the provinces into which they are moving: they are called, perhaps too harshly, heretics and religious vagrants, and other epithets not respectful are attached to their names when they are mentioned. Yet they are blameworthy: they ought not to have left the party; it was unjust to their fellows, it was perilous to themselves, and nothing but mischief can come of this self-detachment and this disloyalty to the spirit and genius of the commonwealth of Christ.

Sometimes it may be legitimate to go off a little way alone, when you are upon the mountains. It is a delight of my own: I like to escape noise and chatter: when I am in the church of the mountains I do not want little questions upon little subjects, and small remarks upon infinitesimal topics. I love the awful silence. Going down on one occasion from the Wengern Alp to Lauterbrunnen I went off alone, and the mists came on suddenly. What did I look for? For the footsteps. As the mist thickened, I bent more closely to the ground. While I could see footsteps I had no fear. Here and there they seemed to get confused, so that I could not follow the line of my journey, and at these points of confusion my fear was excited, and I dared scarcely move. I looked back; I listened; I longed to be near the tents of the shepherds.

But footsteps are companions : you cannot tell what a picture of a footprint is until you are left lost among the mountains : to come suddenly upon a line of footprints is to be at home.

We live in a day of religious adventure, of high and daring enterprise. Man after man is going off to carve his own way through the mountains, or to navigate his ship by a course of his own devising. Be careful. If you are a genius, twice baptised, thrice anointed from heaven, with a cloven tongue upon your head, go—but make very sure about these signs before starting. The lamp of genius is not often kindled in one century, and there is no fool so gigantic and so pitiful as the man who mistakes himself for a genius. Little boats, keep near the shore ; little children, take hold of your mother's dress ; poor scholars, wait upon your teachers ; feeble and timid, never go out of sight—forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is. "Brethren," says Paul, "be ye followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample."

Loneliness has its perils in the religious life. We hear now and again of a man who says he is going to give up all religious associations of a public kind, and is going to remain at home. Some men are now boasting that they are Christians *unattached* ; independent Christians. What is this religious independence as interpreted by these men ? Not one little gaslight is independent ; every one of them is a blink of sunlight. Here is a star independent of the universe. If we saw it coming we should get out of its road. Tell me that all the stars are caught in one great scheme, and that not a sparkle of the glory of the least of them can be lost, and I am proportionally at rest. Loneliness, I repeat, has its perils in the religious life. When the devil gets a man absolutely alone, who will win ? Not the man—in the vast proportion of cases. There was only one man that won in single fight, and that man was the Lord from heaven. Oh, let us shelter one another ; let us be mutual protections ; let us have a commonwealth of interest and sympathy ; let us live in one another's prayers and sympathy and love. Union is strength ; two are better far than one—if the one fall, he can be lifted up again ; but if he fall alone, who will assist him to his feet ?

Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is.

“Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds’ tents.” This poor woman in the song had lost her loved one, and she was told that if she wanted him she would find him on accustomed beats and familiar paths. God leaves his footsteps on the earth, and if we follow his footprints we shall find him. He has built his churches, raised his altars, and he says, “Where my name is recorded, there will I meet thee, there will I bless thee.” Be in the way of blessing : if you cannot find God himself, find his footprints ; go to his altar and say, He ought to be here ; he has sworn to be here ; and whilst thou art yet speaking the apparently dead cold ashes will glow, and on that altar there shall rise up a living flame, and out of the fire thou shalt hear the voice of thy God.

Feed thy kids beside the shepherds’ tents. Then we shall have communion. We must speak to one another now and then, or the poor aching heart would die. They that feared the Lord spake often one to another : and the Lord hearkened, and heard it. Christianity institutes a fellowship, a community of interest and purpose. We are the complement of each other. No one man is all men. You have something I want ; I have something you want. In these higher meanings, let no man call aught that he has his own. Let us have all our highest thoughts and sympathies in common, so that there shall be no poor man in the Church—the poorest scholar having access to the richest thoughts, the dullest ear the opportunity of listening to the sweetest music.

In the tent of the shepherd there was always some instrument that could be used for the soothing of fear and the excitement of hope. It might be a poor small instrument, but it was of infinite value in the lonely places. It is related how the commander of the ship *Fox*, when his crew rose almost in mutiny, and his passengers accorded him nothing but the coldest looks, when he reached land, said, “Thank God, there was one relief, and one only : I had a fiddler on board.” That musical instrument brought the hearts together when nothing else could. A snatch of a song, a strain of some forgotten music, one touch of nature—and that

did far more than all the captain's orders, exhortations, and attempts to persuade his all but mutinous companions that all was right. Do not stray away from the music of the Church : do not suppose you can hum tune enough for your own soul, or whisper yourself into victory and triumph : your mouth will dry, and your tongue will cleave to the roof of your mouth. Oh, there are times when I love the dear old tunes ! They redeem common metre from commonplace, and lift up ordinary words into high meanings, and send the soul a-throb and a-swaying with such a hearty, happy rhythm. This I never feel so much as when in foreign lands, where there is no Sabbath, no church that is cared for, no voice attuned to gospel messages. To get back again to the old psalm-book, to hear the old Scripture read in the familiar tones, to unite in holy prayer together—this is partial heaven. Thus I again repeat the exhortation, Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together ; beware of loneliness, beware of the independence which is isolation ; seek for communion, for music, for protection, for security, for all that comes of organised life, household delight and trust ; and thus the enemy will never find you alone and at a disadvantage, but always surrounded by those who can recall the sweetest memories to your recollection, and enrich your hearts by reminders of the infinite promises of God, and thus a commonwealth shall be the basis of victory.

What footprints are we leaving behind us ? Where have we been ? Should we really like the young to put their feet in our footsteps ? Some of us dare not tell where we have been. Are our footprints on the threshold of the house of evil ? If they could be tracked one by one, to what destinations would they conduct ? Do they lead to the house of God ? Have we but one track in life, and is its goal the altar ? Blessed be God ; once we went with a multitude to do evil, once we had gone astray ; but now we have returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. All we, like sheep, had gone astray ; we had turned every one to his own way, an independence in evil, self-illuminated, self-destroyed. We must leave footprints somewhere. No man can come into life, and live thirty, forty, fifty, or seventy years, and go out without leaving the mark of his

feet somewhere. Let us put our feet into the footprints of Jesus Christ. Whither do those footprints lead? To Gethsemane, to Golgotha, to Bethany, and after Bethany—Heaven. We can have no difficulty in finding the footprints of Christ if we really want to discover them. His were feet not to be mistaken for any other. They all pointed to the Cross, they moved evermore towards the Cross; they never turned towards selfish delight, never to the palaces of luxury, always to the lightning-struck, the thunder-cursed tree, the Cross.

Let us see that our footprints are all shaping towards home, that the foot is always set in that direction. Do not let us deceive and mislead anybody who may put their feet into our footprints under the impression that they are going home, when they are really going to their ruin. Let every step be heavenward—

“Footprints which perhaps another,
Sailing o’er life’s solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.”

There are desolations in which a footprint is a friend, there are solitudes in which the mark of a human foot is as the signature and pledge of God.

Wanderer, return! You have been out a long way on the high barren mountains, and you have got nothing. Come in again, and be commonplace. You started a genius, you come back with your true name on your forehead. You went forth to reform and conquer the world, and you are all bespattered with mud, you are hunger-bitten and thirst-fevered, and your cheeks are shrunk in; come back and be wise. Come back; there is room for thee, and bread enough in thy Father’s house, and to spare—yea, when all the angels have done, and all the men have partaken, there is more bread at the end than there was at the beginning.

I wish to be found at last where the good old fathers of the Church were found. If I have made a small *détour*, who has not done the same? I never remember to have gone off from any point of departure without wishing myself safely back again.

There is no wine like the old wine, there is no house like the old house, there is no bread like the old bread ; no man, having drunk old wine, straightway desireth new, for he saith, The old is better. What say you to a general, unanimous, loving, loyal, immediate return ? There would be joy in the presence of the angels of God over repentant thinkers, errant geniuses, self-mistaken self-idolaters.

Am I asked the question, "Where is Christ ? Where is God ? I am like the woman in the Canticles—I have lost him ; I would I could find him ?" My answer is, Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents. Keep in the accustomed familiar paths and ways, and, if he is not there to-day, he will be more than there to-morrow. Be thou in the right place. He may have gone after some wanderer, but he will return, and if he has abandoned thee for a small moment, it is that he may gather thee with everlasting kindness.

NOTE.

Design of the Book.—"The design of this charming poem is to teach us a lesson of practical righteousness by the record of an extraordinary example of virtue in a young maiden in humble life, who encountered and conquered the greatest temptations from the most exalted personage in the land. The simple story, divested of its poetic form, is as follows :—A village girl, the daughter of a widowed mother of Shulam, is betrothed to a young shepherd, whom she met whilst tending the flock. Fearing lest the frequent meetings of these lovers should be the occasion of scandal, the brothers of the Shulamite employ her in the vineyard on their farm. Whilst on the way to this vineyard she one day falls in with the *cortège* of King Solomon, who is on a spring visit to the country. Struck with her great beauty the king captures her, conveys her to his royal pavilion, then conducts her to Jerusalem in great pomp, in the hope of dazzling and overcoming her with his splendour, and eventually lodges her in his harem. But all is in vain. True to her virtuous love, she resists all the allurements of the exalted sovereign, spurns all his promises to elevate her to the highest rank, and in the midst of the gay scenes assures her humble shepherd, who followed her to the capital, that her affections are sacredly and inviolably pledged to him. Solomon, convinced at last that all his advances are in vain, allows her to quit the royal residence. Hand in hand the two faithful lovers return to her native place, and on their way home visit the tree under which their love-spark was first kindled, and there renew their vows of constancy and fidelity. On their arrival they are welcomed by their companion shepherds, and she is rewarded by her brothers for her exemplary virtue."—KITTO'S *Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature*.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, thou art great and we are small, and we are the work of thine hands, and thou hast numbered the very hairs of our head, and set a watch about every step of our life, and thy love hath made us precious unto thee. Behold, we cannot tell what we read in thy word because of its great mystery of light : we hear mighty thunderings and see flamings of ineffable glory, and we hear the sound of a going which we cannot follow, and yet again dost thou come to us in gentle speeches and in visions which the heart can seize, and thou dost drop upon our life thy word, which is sweeter than honey, yea, than the honeycomb. We would see somewhat of thy majesty and thy glory, that we may be ennobled thereby, and lifted up, as it were, with the ascension of the angels. But specially would we pray evermore to have access to thy power, grace, wisdom, and love, for the supply of daily necessity, for the direction of continual perplexity, and for the satisfaction of every hunger of the soul. We bless thee for the revelation of thyself in Christ Jesus, who was found in fashion as a man ; we thank thee for all his words of truth and beauty ; we bless thee for his discourses, for his miracles, and above all for his sacrificial death and for his resurrection and ascension to glory, where he now is, praying for every one of us, and covering our weakness with his infinite strength. Enable us to follow him as we may be able ; according to the littleness of our power and opportunity may we study his life, put our feet in his footprints, undertake to do his will, and may we be found at last as his commended servants. We bless thee for a life we cannot understand ; its joys are keen, its pains are often intolerable. Thou hast given to our life day and night, beautiful light, sweet spring times and summer hours, occasions of rapture and of heavenly vision and divine absorption ; then hast thou sent a great darkness upon us like a judgment, and there have been sounds of thunder in it as of great wrath, and the stars have been withdrawn, and thou hast caused us to feel the gloom and the burden of night. Do with us what thou wilt : not our will, but thine, be done, but take not thy Holy Spirit from us ; in our deepest distresses may we be able to say, Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him. May there be no extremity in our life which shall be as the victory of the enemy, but in our greatest exigencies may we find thy grace more than sufficient, in our keenest pains may we know how all-healing and all-comforting is the balm of thy pity. We give ourselves to thee again in the name of Jesus Christ, our Mediator. We yield ourselves to thee, body, soul, and spirit, our flesh and our will, our imagination and our supreme desire, all the energy of our souls, and all the helplessness of our life ; we would lay these at thy feet ; they are thine, thou knowest their highest uses : purify us as vessels are made

pure for the use of the sanctuary. Whether our days be many or few, may they all be thine, and may we so spend our little time as to have created within us a burning desire to know what is to be revealed beyond. Regard thy servants who have come to this resting-place from business, from occupation of divers kinds, from many tumults, vexations, and trials of the world. Give them rest awhile, a little breathing time, and may there be rents amid the clouds of their life through which the light of the heavens shall shine. Regard those who are given to the study of thy Word, and who are preparing themselves under the dispensation of thy Spirit for the unfoldment of heavenly riches; be the Lamp shining upon their book, the Spirit inspiring their understanding and their heart. Be with those who live lives of weary monotony, the night as the day and the day as the night, the whole year one pain of weariness; draw such forth into the light of thy sanctuary, and inspire such with a desire to do the work of thy vineyard. Look upon all little children, and grant unto them blessing according to their necessity, salvation from sin, protection from every temptation and snare; may they live to a good old age and be better than were their forefathers. The Lord be with our sick ones, with great comforting, developing in them all sweetness of patience and completeness of resignation, so that the strong may learn from the weak, and the sick chamber may be the church of the house. Be with our friends who are far away, and yet in sympathy and love near at hand; unite us in the fellowship of common trusts and common anticipations; may we know the unity of the spirit and the sweetness of the bond of peace. Let the land receive of the rain of thy blessing. Spare not the cloud, but pour it forth in refreshing showers upon the whole country. God save the Queen; multiply the days of her life, and establish her throne in righteousness, equity, and all honourableness. Direct our leaders; inspire those who create and foster the national sentiment; save us from all tyranny, oppression, and from all unholy and disastrous weapons and instrumentalities, and send upon the land the spirit of patriotic contentment. May the blessing of the Lord be turned into blessings for all mankind. The earth is thine; we pray for every corner of it, for its broad continents and its little islands, its centres of light and its places of gloom; for the shepherd upon the hills, for the sailor upon the waves, for the prisoner in his cell, for the wanderer in the jungle and the wilderness,—for all mankind; we are all thine. Make the earth thine house, light it with thy glory, and may it be the centre of thine approbation, having fixed upon it the love of its Creator-Father. Amen.

Chapter i. 9.

"I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots."

THE USE AND ABUSE OF PARABLES.

IT is thus that love multiplies itself by many images. Love consecrates all things beautiful by turning them into symbols and pictures and suggestions of its own idol. There is no end to the creations and appropriations of love. Love sees the image

of its dearest one everywhere, and claims it as its own. As Jesus Christ has found in this chapter symbols of the kingdom of heaven, so love in all ages and in all places has created for itself new heavens and a new earth, and has given a new reading to all the things therein, and has thus multiplied the literature which no eyes but its own can accurately read. Let us look at the power of fancy, this creative and symbolising power, this power of reading the inner mysticism and ideality of things, as a joy, a danger, and a responsibility.

In finding new symbols we find new pleasures, and in the inspiration of our love we turn all things visible to new and sacred uses. Love turns water into wine at every feast : that which was a miracle at the first is a commonplace in the long run : love widens ever. We give a language to flowers ; we make the stars talk ; we turn the horses in Pharaoh's chariots into meanings which the proud Pharaoh never saw ; we make business itself into a religion, and write upon our gold an image better and purer than the image and superscription of Cæsar. Thus love embodies itself in all things lovable. We own what we love. We have only the meanest property in things that we do not love. Now this is the joy of Christ himself in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel by Matthew. The object of his love was the kingdom of heaven, and day by day he compared it with new comparisons, and so gave his Church the treasure of his parables. Jesus Christ said, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto——." That is the entrance to the great picture-gallery, the great paradisaic beauty by which he imagined that wondrous and immeasurable quantity. Like unto a sower ; a goodly pearl : treasure hid in a field : hidden heaven : a grain of mustard seed : a net cast into the sea : a king travelling into a far country : virgins going forth to meet the bridegroom ;—by so many images did he make plain to us that manifold kingdom of his.

This is the way of love : it is a parable-making power ; it lives in poetry ; it delights in the creation of new images ; it yokes itself into new relationships, and calls all ministries and agencies to join themselves to its chariot, and draw it forward in triumphant and right royal progress. Wondrous in this way

have been the creations and adaptations of love. Who could pluck a little rosemary, and make anything of it but rosemary? Love could. Love says, You shall be a symbol of remembrance and affection. Thus poor Ophelia gathers to her madness a new pathos—she plucks and gives the rosemary. What is a pansy? Nothing to him who has nothing in him, but to the man who has the seeing eye, the cunning, all-interpreting love, the pansy is the English for *pensée*, the French *thought*. So when I cannot tell you all I want to say I slip the little meek-eyed pansy, *pensée*, into my envelope, and you read all the meaning, great utterances of heart-speech; you understand the little parable of the pansy. The timid youth whose love almost chokes him when he is going to speak it, does not know what to do till the florist tells him to pluck an acacia leaf, and he says to him, She will understand that parable: the acacia leaf stands for platonic love; the leaf which stands for such love does not admit of vulgar interpretation: you slip in the acacia leaf, and she will understand all about it. We cannot speak to our friend, bowed down with keen distresses, burdened with great afflictions. He has lost again and again the lives he most loved, and his life is now a process of grave-digging, and any words of ours would but augment the grief which we would seek to alleviate. But we are cunning in the use of floral eloquence: we pluck a sprig of amaranth, and send it to him. When he receives it he will see in that sprig of amaranth a symbol of the everlastingness of God, the immortality and unquenchableness of the true life, and in that amaranth he will see revelation and parable and sacred vision. When we cannot tell all our affliction to our dearest friend we will put in some bitter aloes, and the heart that receives the token will understand the sad sign.

So we too have our parables. "I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots." The kingdom of heaven is like unto a sower: like unto treasure: like unto a goodly pearl: like unto a net: like unto virgins going forth to meet the bridegroom. My love hath ten thousand images and symbols, infinite jewellery of expression: who then can be poor who really loves? If we loved more we should have more. This is the alchemy that transforms the base into the real and intrinsically

valuable. Encourage the soul in its love of beauty. We cannot go too often into the garden if we go to turn every flower into a speaking angel. It will be a dark day for us when beauty ceases to talk to the heart and preach the sweet gospel of hope. Well said Festus, "Some souls lose all things but the love of beauty: by that love they are redeemable, for in love and beauty they acknowledge good, and good is God, the great Necessity."

Whilst most of us have entered somewhat, or at some time, into the passion of this rapture, and have created a thousand images and symbols by which to typify our love and our supreme ambition, I have here to remind all such that not only is this power of fancy a keen and thrilling joy, but it is a positive and an immediate danger. The danger arises from the fact that we may consider our duty done when we have instituted a beautiful comparison. Our religion may perish in sentimental expressions. We may die in words; we may say, "A bundle of myrrh is my wellbeloved unto me: my beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-gedi." Christ is the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley—as an apple-tree among the trees of the woods. We may see him coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchantman, and yet our love may pass off as an evaporation, and never embody itself in one act of sacrifice or in one attempt at service. That is the danger of living wholly in the fancy, or largely in the higher range of the creative faculties of the soul. We may create wit for the laughter of others, and forget to keep any of it for the rejoicing of our own house. The danger is that, if we live the parabolical life, contenting ourselves with making parables, we may never advance to Gethsemane and Golgotha. We may create a kind of artificial life, and thus miss the great utilities of our being. The heart that is swiftest and surest in the creation of symbols is not always to be trusted in the hour of pain and distress. This love-sick woman in the Canticles writes her own condemnation as the victim of supineness and indolence. How lovingly she yearns over the absent one, how she charges others to take care of him and watch for him, and yet once he came to the door and knocked, saying, "Open to me, for my head is filled with the dew, and my locks with the

drops of the night,"—he was actually at the door, his hand was upon it, his voice sounded through it, and what answered she? This was her mean reply: "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on?" See how great is the danger of the fancy-power, of the parable-making faculty, how possible it is to get into high ecstasy of poetry and to forget the courtesies and rigid duties of life. Says she, "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on?" and though finally she roused herself, and put on her coat, her beloved had withdrawn, and was gone. She called, but she could not find him; she sought him, but no answer came back through the air, and the watchmen mocked, and the keepers of the walls joined with the watchmen, and they smote her and wounded her, and tore off her veil, and left her—she who was wild in poetry, so grand in the creation of high sentiments—she who lay in the midst of the garden of flowers, and spoke beautiful things about her absent one, saying, "I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariot." There is, then, a great danger in living the poetical life. We praise our parents—do we obey them? Sentimental, rhyming, filial poet, do you obey your venerable father, your aged and loving mother? We do not ask if you send them a little blank verse now and then, or a verse of rhyme—do you study their comfort, anticipate their wishes, and show the devotion of real sympathy, gratitude, and love? Many a young man talks about his parents in polysyllables, and thus makes a fool's ineloquent speech about them, who has yet not had the grace to obey a single commandment. Take away your poetry—it is a lie. We seek for one poetry only, and that the blossoming and the fragrance and the fruitfulness of real duty and obedience.

There is also another danger to which many young men would do well to take heed, and that is the danger of reciting poetry and living prose. Be very careful as devotees of poetry and reciters of jingling rhyme—take care that you do not recite your poetry and live your sapless prose. It would be a disastrous irony, it would be the most perfect and cruel sarcasm. Rather, on the other hand, say no poetry but live much. If it must come to a choice of one or the other, let this course be ours—to live the poetry, to prove the sublimity by many a gentle, loving action.

If we can unite the two and be as eloquent in service, so be it ; but if the one only can be adopted, let us adopt the eloquence of loving obedience and noble self-sacrifice.

How possible it is to sing hymns and to be acting blasphemies ! It is possible. Consider that for one moment, because at the first blush it would seem to be utterly beyond the bounds of possibility to sing in an oratorio and then to act dishonestly, to sing an anthem and then to tell a lie, to utter a hymn and then to perpetrate a cruelty. The poetry is at the wrong end in such cases. Let us have prose climbing up into poetry, and not poetry sinking down into contemptible prose ; let us see to it that though we have many crucifixes in the house we have a cross in the heart ; though we compare our beloved to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariot, we also transfer that love into noble charity and sacrifice and sweet service which will benefit mankind, as well as enchant their fancy and please their literary taste.

Not only is this power of making parables and comparisons a joy and a danger, it is also a responsibility. To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin. If the master is beautiful, so must the servant be. Shall the master be a sweet rose and the servant a stinging-nettle ? Is that not very often the case ? Shall the master be a fruitful tree, making the city glad, and the servant be as a upas, casting its deadly shade upon all living things ? Let us understand that every compliment we pay to Christ is an obligation we lay upon ourselves if we are his faithful followers. "Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." That is the sacred law. "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." We are to be transformed by the beauty we admire. This is the great law, namely, we shall be like him, for—mark the reason—we shall see him as he is. The sight will be transfiguring : to look at beauty will be to be made beautiful ; to see God will be to be made divine ; the fair vision shall make us also fair ; otherwise it is wasted upon us, and we do not really see it. It will be impossible to see Christ as he is

without being transformed into his beauty. But do we not see Christ as he is when we come into the sanctuary? Far from it. We see sections of Christ, phases of Christ, we hear something about Christ, but we do not see the whole Christ in the absoluteness of his integrity and the ineffableness of his beauty, or we should be caught in a transfiguring and transforming power, and the very visage of our face would be changed.

Here, then, are abundant lessons for us all. The power of comparison is to be cherished and developed. Compare the living Saviour to all things beautiful; make every flower of the field into a parable: the summer will grow too few flowers to set forth all his beauties. Go out in the summer and attach to every flower some name that shall indicate some beauty in your Lord; watch for the coming stars, and according to the beauty of each name it, and, so to speak, baptize it in the Lord's name, that when you see it again it may remind you of some high ecstasy of the soul. All that is wise, beautiful, legitimate; it gives ennoblement to the mind and enlargement to the whole sphere of the imagination; it refines and elevates the taste by great purification and enrichment; but do not rest there. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." Are we not all witnesses to the wasting power of rapture, to the enervating reaction of high rhapsody in any service? Have we not been on the hill of transfiguration, and desired to build tabernacles there, wishing never to come down into the cold and tumultuous world again? Mark the danger. Life is real, sad, tragical, a great daily pain, as well as an occasional rapture and a high realisation of the noblest intellectual conceptions and experiences.

In comparing Christ with things beautiful, noble, grand, we are writing a heavy indictment against ourselves if we profess to be his followers, and do not rise to the grandeur of the occasion. Shall we be found in the king's procession who have about us anything that is mean, worthless, vile, corrupting? Shall we not make it our endeavour to be in some sort worthy of the royal train, and worthy of its high meaning? Herein is the responsibility arising from the power we have of seeing the beautiful

and acknowledging it. This is our calling in Christ Jesus : as he was so are we in this world. Men are to take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus and have learned of him. As he who passes through a garden of roses brings with him part of the fragrance breathed from the beauteous flowers, so we who come forth from the fellowship of Christ are to show somewhat of the radiance of his countenance, and to speak somewhat with the eloquence of his accent. This is the incarnation which he desires at our hands, not only to compare him with things royal and beautiful, but to incarnate him in actions more eloquent than the pomp of speech or the melody of music.

Who can carry out that high vocation ? Who would not rather sit in his garden and make parables, and blow them from the pipe of his imagination like gilded bubbles into the summer air ? That would be easy, that would be a pious luxury ; but to cut off the right hand, to pluck out the right eye, to slay the inner offence, to test the soul as by fire, who can submit to this inexorable discipline ? And yet, if we fail here it will but go to the aggravation of the account against us that we have compared our Saviour to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariot, and have talked about him in foaming poetry, but have lived mean, petty, worthless lives. The God of the heavens give us wisdom !

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou leadest man by a way that he knoweth not. It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. Thou knowest all the way, and we see of it but an inch at once. Lead on, thou Mighty One, full of grace and wisdom, full of tenderness and full of judgment. Strength and beauty are with thee. Thou canst not do wrong. Thou wilt pity us when we are infirm. Thou knowest our frame, thou rememberest that we are dust; thou wilt not hasten us unduly on the journey of life. Thou dost cause the sun to set, so that we cannot see the road; then thou dost give thy beloved sleep. Sometimes we are faint, yet even then, by thy grace, pursuing. Our faintness does not lead us to change the road. We rest awhile, we wonder about the new scenes and relations of things, and behold, even in dreams thou art good: for thou dost show to the sealed eyes what is never shown to the open vision. Night and day thou art good. Thou hast stars for the night as well as a sun for the daytime. Behold! who can find out God into perfection? or lay a line upon his power? or sound all the depth of the infinity of his being? We will praise thy grace. Thou hast led us from Bethel onward—from the dream-time to the work-time and the waiting-time. It is still the same God—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—ever tender, ever redeeming the souls of men; opening ways that surprise our ignorance, and surrounding us by defences which no enemy can violate. Blessed be thy name. Praised be the blessed Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Reveal thyself unto us in all ways. May we never lose sight of thine image. May our whole life rise to the mystery of thy presence, and feel the infinite joy which is the beginning of profoundest worship, and then pass into tender communion, knowing the riches of grace, the meaning of truth, the warmth of nearness to thy heart; then set us down on the common road that we may do life's common work with uncommon power and wisdom. We bless thee for growth in grace, for visions of Christ ever brightening, for confidence in Christ ever deepening; so that whilst once the water was but to the ankles it has risen to the knees, and now, lo! how great a river—verily a stream to swim in. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. We are all pilgrims. If we have rested the staff for a moment, it is still within sight; presently we shall take hold of it again and be away on the dusty road, climbing the hard steep, or groping our way through the dull valley. Still our eyes shall be towards the lode-star of the skies; still our spirits shall yearn for thee; still we shall now and again feel in the air some scent of a better place, some odour wafted from the hidden paradise. Be this our experience, be this our joy, through Christ Jesus, Son of man, Son of God. Then at the last we shall hardly know when we have exchanged earth for heaven. Amen.

Chapter ii.

SATISFACTION IN CHRIST.

WE have been told that the Song of Solomon is a piece of secular literature. That is not the judgment of unfriendly critics, but the judgment of the most pious and evangelical minds. What is the literature which is called secular? We have not dismissed the case when the word "secular" has been employed in designating the literature which is before us. The word secular itself must be defined. We may be too apt to divide all things into sacred and profane. Men have actually divided history so. In the olden times there were not wanting men who spoke of certain kinds of history as "profane." They did not mean in any sense indicating wickedness, but as contradistinguishing a kind of history from the history which is found in the Bible, and which on account of its being in the Bible is called sacred. What, then, is secular literature? Should we call stones, wood, iron, glass, secular substances? Let us allow that they might be so denominated. But may they not all be gathered up, and by pious ability be shaped into a sanctuary? then the very materials we once regarded as in some sense secular or profane become sacred, hallowed, separate for holy uses. It may be the same with literature that is called secular. The Song of Songs may be but a love poem—so we have already ventured to describe it; but may it not have further meanings than the poet himself saw? Do we always know what will become of the buildings we put up, the programmes we suggest, the courses of life or policy we indicate? Suppose we turn the Song of Songs into a riddle, and ask for an answer in personality? The riddle should be, Given all this elaborate and glowing description, to find out who is meant by it? All history is open for the suggestion of an answer. Who can find a man who will fitly clothe himself with all this parable, and wear it like an appropriate robe, and who having assumed it will at once indicate his right to it, and have that claim confirmed by universal consent? When we come into the Scriptures we should come with one cry, namely, *Sirs*, we would see Jesus! We shall know him when we see him; there is no mistaking that identity; even those who most nearly approach him stand away at an infinite distance when he

himself comes forth in visible and palpable disclosure. Whilst he is away there are men who might simulate his presence; they might paint themselves into a high beauty, and adorn themselves with many rich robes, and might so far cause us to believe that they were what they professed to be—the very Christ of God. But when he comes it will be as when the sun comes after we have trimmed our artificial lights, and called them the glory of day: they look well; they almost seem to fit the occasion, they just lay themselves over the darkness and melt it away; but when the sun comes, rejoicing like a strong man to run a race, the first thing he does is to put out all artificial rivalry, to drive the darkness away, so that we can see it fleeing like a thing that is afraid; there is no mistaking the identity and the royalty of the sun. If you will suggest any historical character who can put on this robe, and wear it as if he had a right to it, do so; then Jesus Christ shall come in and assume the garment; then let men say to whom the robe belongs. We do not force this Song of Songs into unmeant uses or unholy uses when we ask how far it reveals in anticipation the Son of God.

Let us look at some of the features here indicated with ■ master's hand.

In this chapter there is given to Christ an undisputed pre-eminence in beauty and fruitfulness. And the Church is magnified by Christ into an equivalent beauty. Sometimes we can hardly tell whether it is the Church or Christ that is described, for the two seem to become interchangeable and one: "My beloved is mine, and I am his," and it is impossible to say with regard to the distribution of beauty which belongs to the one and which belongs to the other. The bride is made meet for the bridegroom. But let us take this description of beauty as referring to Christ; then see how pre-eminent it is. "As the lily among thorns" (ver. 2). Is that a description of the Church? So let it be. Meanwhile, it is also descriptive of the Church's Redeemer and King. "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood" (ver. 3). These beautiful things put all rivalry far away. Not, as the lily among roses, as the lily among other flowers nearly as beautiful; but, "as the lily among thorns,"—the point is in the contrast. There is no approach to equality, no

claim for approximation ; the whole stress of the thought is in its strong and powerful contrast. "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood"—the trees that bear no fruit, the trees that are little but timber. Not our apple tree, for our apple tree is not known in the land in which this song was written, but another kind of tree—the apricot, the quince, the tree that spread itself far and wide, and seemed to be enamelled with living gold ; such a tree as perhaps western and northern eyes never gazed upon. What we have to do, therefore, is to point out the pre-eminence of beauty ; not only beauty, but supreme beauty ; not only supreme beauty as beautiful to the eye, but ideal beauty, that leaves even the imagination far behind. This is the conception we are to form of Christ : all other flowers are but thorns, all other trees are withered in every branch ; Jesus Christ stands out, the one loveliness, the one satisfaction. All this might be mere poetry, or sentiment, or dream. We have, therefore, to refer the matter to Christ himself. Does Jesus Christ anywhere even seem to confirm this pre-eminence of beauty, fascination, and claim ? If he nowhere refers to any such pre-eminence of beauty and power, then let the Song of Songs be reckoned among the poetries of the past, and let it fall into desuetude. But what does Jesus Christ himself say ? If he does not sing the song, does he at any point confirm the images or figures by which he is represented in this sweetest of all music ? Hear him : "I am the Vine." He is a tree then—tree of life ; he supplies the branches ; the branches are nothing without him : "Without me," saith the vine, "without me ye can do nothing." Truly, there is a sound of pre-eminence in that claim. He is not second on the list of greatness who has so asserted himself. Hear him again : "I am the Light of the world." Is that not a claim to pre-eminence ? Not, I am one of the lights of the world ; not, I am one of the stars of heaven ; not, I am one of a multitude, and you ought to be indebted to us all : but simply, sternly magnificent in the austerity of the figure, "I am the Light of the world." So, then, she who sang this love-song in the eastern land has some authority for assigning to her love pre-eminence, kingship, in the very words of Christ himself. Hear him again : "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be

my disciple." Is Christ, then, one of a multitude? does he take his place modestly amongst all the claimants to human attention and confidence, and say, You behold us all, a galaxy of glory, of wit, of intellectual splendour, and philosophic capacity,—take which of us seems best to suit the occasion? Be he whom he may, he stands out at the head, and says: Discipleship means hatred of all other claims, absorption in my personality, undivided and immutable consecration to my service. Did Christ then mean to pour contempt upon father, mother, wife, child, brother, sister? No; the whole point of his argument is in the contrast which he seeks to establish as between himself and all other creatures. So when the singer of this song speaks of her love "as the apple tree among the trees of the wood," she is confirmed so far by the authority of Jesus Christ, who claims that all love should be concentrated upon himself, and that therefore all other and minor love should be sanctified and ennobled, and share the elevation of the first dominating passion. Hear him once more: "All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers." That is enough to establish his claim to pre-eminence. Whether that claim was just or unjust, there it is. He would stand in solitary shepherdliness: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. . . . No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." This is not murder, it is sacrifice.

Keeping, therefore, strictly and critically to the mere literature of the question, whatever is claimed in the Song of Solomon for an anticipated and ideal Christ was asserted in actual words by the historical Christ himself: "I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star": "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." "That in all things," saith the apostle, "he might have the pre-eminence." So far there is no forcing of the song into undue uses by finding in it the pre-eminent and ideal personality of Christ.

In this chapter protection and satisfaction are ascribed to Christ. "I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste" (ver. 3). The quince has a great shadow. The very shadow of that fruit-tree is a house, a place of protection and rest and sweet quietude. Can we be wrong in

ascribing protection and satisfaction to Jesus Christ? Does he himself anywhere offer these privileges? Does the poet here transcend the occasion, and resort to a species of metaphor which can have no solid equivalent in history? Let us hear Christ himself. Observe what the question is; it is purely one of protection and satisfaction—the protection indicated by the shadow, and the satisfaction being indicated by the fruit which “was sweet to my taste.” What hast thou to offer, thou Son of God? Thou hast not where to lay thine head; what gift can be in thine empty hand? Hear the Saviour: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” These words seem to fall like chiming bells into the music of the ancient song. “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink.” Lord, every man thirsts, every man’s life is like a burning fever; the rivers cannot quench that fire: canst thou quench it? “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” This is poetry turned to history; the history will again become poetry, and some day we shall hardly know which is the history and which is the poetry: the poetry will be so lofty in its claim, and the history will be so musical in its gospels, that he will have a most inspired ear who can tell where the poetry ceases and the history begins, or contrariwise. Enough, however, has been quoted to show that Jesus Christ offers protection and satisfaction to all who come unto him. Who has not felt a sense of satisfaction and protection in being safe in the arms of Jesus? Who has not felt the difference in blessedness between Christ’s words and all other? They have vindicated themselves. One taste that the Lord is gracious hath put away from the palate the memory of every other feast. This point can be testified to by living witnesses. Christians are not men who have had experience in one direction only; they have sat at many tables; they have been the guests of the devil; they have gone with their vessels from spring to spring that they might taste many waters; and now, having been in a far country, and returned home, and tasted the sweetness of Christ’s doctrine and promises, they say, Lord, ever more give us this bread, this water: there is none like it; it fills the soul with satisfaction. Men have gone mad with delight under the consciousness of Christ’s presence—not mad in the sense of mental unbalancing,

but in the sense of rapture, ecstasy, joy unutterable, unspeakable, and full of glory. This has been the experience of the most solid intellects amongst men. It has taken a long time to set them on fire, but once in a glow they have burned up the rivers that were meant to quench them. Let Christians declare their testimony, and not be ashamed of the protection and satisfaction they have enjoyed at the hands of their master and Lord.

Another point would seem to be that Christ is spoken of as always *coming*: "The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills" (ver. 8). Jesus Christ will come again. He has but taken his journey into a far country. "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." He was always speaking of his own coming. His going away seemed to be a kind of returning. He said: I go for your sakes: "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you": "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself": "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him": "The coming of the Lord draweth nigh": he will come as a thief in the night—suddenly, almost unexpectedly: "In such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man cometh." That is the only mood in which we can truly live. Whilst we live in a historical Christ, we also live in a Christ that is yet to complete his advent by another descent. Various theories about that descent have been formed. There is a physical or personal coming; there is another kind of coming—to my own mind richer, larger, and truer—the continual coming of Christ, in new ideas, new impressions, the awakening of higher aspirations, the satisfaction of the soul's hunger; and that wondrous coming which men call Death. Think not of your Beloved as away in any sense of distance that signifies separation, coldness, and cessation of fellowship: he is away preparing for us; he will come again. He comes every day to the soul that waits for him. He can so come to the spirit that any bodily coming would be held in contempt in comparison; he

can so fill the heart, and satisfy and gladden it, that any vision of his personality by the bodily eyes would be unworthy of the occasion. He enlarges our manhood, he clears our spiritual horizon; he gives us to feel that he can come better spiritually than physically and literally. At the same time, let us hold any theory of Christ's coming we please which draws us towards him, which impels us to duty and sacrifice, which creates in us a larger manhood and a completer beneficence; but whatever the coming may be there must be in it a spiritual realisation transcending all language in its expression, and all sensuous representation as to its grandeur and value.

Then Christ is associated in this song with springtide, light, song, gladness: "My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, and the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" (vers. 10-13). That is not mere passion of words. There is a sense in which the soul feels every touch of that appeal. When Christ comes the spring comes. Say not the coming of Christ is the coming of winter. If your Christianity has been associated with frost and snow and ice, cold north-easterly blasts, then know ye that some false Christ has laid hold of your duped souls. Where Christ is there is spring, music, festival, wine of heaven, dancing and joy fit for the city of jasper walls. How stands the case with us, then? Are we orphans? are we desolate wanderers? are we without an ideal pre-eminence? are we without a sense of protection and satisfaction? Or have we in our hearts an assurance that Christ is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, all and in all? Are we assured that being with us he will bring springtide into the soul, we shall forget all the sorrow, all the night, all the cold, and in one warm gleam of his presence shall find and feel the beginning of eternal summer? Oh, poor life of man, thou needest some comfort! Life feels so keenly the wintry wind. Then at its very festival there is a deep pit called the grave, in which no flower grows, in which

no fair thing can ever live. Poor life, thou needest some comfort; thou art poisoned by the springs thou didst think would quench thy thirst; and when thou hast got a little light, and art sheltering it by thine hand, lo! a rough wind blows it out, and leaves the darkness darker still: the children go astray, and friends are like broken staves, and the stream that was coming to quench thy thirst recedes and mocks thee like a living enemy. Oh, poor life! truly thou dost need comfort. Thy comfort is in Christ. He knows the meaning of pain, shame, poverty, desolation, homelessness; he has been buffeted and forsaken; there is no region of poverty he has not known, there is no hardship he has not undergone; his face is marred more than the face of any man; yet see how through the scars there kindles a strange beauty as of hidden light, and see how the pierced hand is put out helpfully, scattering its infinite blessings upon all the misery and pain and necessity of the times. Oh, poor, poor lost one! hast thou not thought of all this? hast thou not thought of Christ? Is it not a great thing that man should be so constituted that he must be drawn by ideals infinite in their sublimity and excellence? Is it not much to the credit even of human nature that nothing can really satisfy but that which is infinitely greater than itself—that the leverage which moves humanity must be from an eternal sanctuary? God recognises in our poverty a proof of our greatness. Were we less the earth might satisfy us; were ours the mere hunger of the body the meanest shrub might find us bread enough: it is because we are men, made in the image and likeness of God, lost divinities, that nothing can appease our hunger but the Tree of Life, nothing quench our thirst but the river of God. Have no mean conceptions of Christ. Do not cause him to be represented by unworthy similitudes. Wherever you hear the highest music, say, That would best express my love of Christ. You call a trumpet a secular instrument: a man may lift up the brazen thing and say, This is secular, this is but perishable material. So it is to him, because he himself is secular, he himself has not realised the passion of immortality. Let another kind of man seize the same instrument, even after it has been filled with unworthy music, and he will cleanse its passages by a new breath, and through it will blow a blast worthy of jubilee, not unworthy of heaven.

Chapters ii. and iii.

SOWING AND REAPING.

THERE is something very remarkable in the sweet words, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" (ii. 13). Wherever we find these words we should be gratified with their music, their simplicity, their human tenderness. When we apply them to Jesus Christ they are invested with new and large significance. Jesus Christ is always calling his Church away to some higher altitude, to some greener pasture, or by some quieter stream. The Church is always under inspiration. This is not the time for rest, finality ; this is the time for marching, advancing, learning, putting into practice what we learn, and obeying the voice of one unseen but well known, calling us to go forward, though we are apparently going into thick darkness and into troubled seas. When did Jesus Christ ever say, You have made all the progress you can make : sit down and rest evermore ; for there is nothing more that can be learned ; at least, there is nothing more for you to acquire ? That is not the voice of Jesus. We should contradict any one instantly and strongly who made the declaration that Jesus Christ had said, Men have now come to the end of their learning and their beneficence. Blessed is he who hears his Lord always saying, Arise, come away : you have not seen all yet ; the real beauty is yet to be shown, the great harvest-field has yet to be reaped ; you have hardly begun to live. Arise, come away, halt not, fear not ; I have many more things to tell thee, and when thou art able to bear them thou shalt hear them one by one. It is a cheerful voice, and a voice that cheers. It is full of vivacity—not the sharpness or shrillness that merely excites and arouses, but the deep music that expresses joy, and that always promises a larger blessing as yet in store. When we sit down, and say, This is the end ; when we dismiss our energy ; when we cease to put on our strength,—then know

that if we were once temples of God we have been forsaken by the living One. We must prove our Christianity by our progress; our love of Christ by understanding the present day, the immediate times, and responding to contemporaneous demands with cheerful alacrity and encouraging abundance: to-morrow will be an unread book; we must peruse it with the learning we have acquired to-day. Every morning brings with it some message from Christ, and that message is always an inspiring one, calling us to some new duty, some humble task, some great endeavour, some painful sacrifice.

Is it then all sunshine? Do we leave behind us all discipline? or is there a voice of warning to be attended to? Let us read these words: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes" (ii. 15). There is nothing fanciful in regarding these "foxes" and "little foxes" as representing spiritual enemies or difficulties peculiar to our situation and capacity. The little foxes spoil the vines, the grapes. What are these little foxes? Which of us is guilty of some great heresy? who can stand up and say he belongs to the party of the great and violent apostasy? who will rank himself with those who openly blaspheme against heaven? Not a man. Who will charge himself with glaring crimes, with obvious and intentional rebellion against God? We do not err in that direction. These would indeed be great foxes, great displays of depravity—a depravity that overleaps itself by its very extravagance and vulgarity. We need have little fear of ourselves along that line; we have lived too long and seen too much to commit ourselves to such gross profanity. But what of the little foxes—the irregularities, the nameless indulgences, the self-consideration, the endless omissions? Who makes some great speech infamous in its conception and its rhetoric? No man at all connected with the sanctuary of God. But what about the little bitter speeches that spoil family communion, the petty criticisms, the malignant, half-concealed allusions, the reminiscences that are all sting, the odd sentences that give the hearer heart-ache all day? and what of concealed selfishness—that worst kind of all, that gloves its hand, that cloaks its personality, that apes the attitude and speech of generosity; a calculated

selfishness that touches and retires, that asks as if not asking, that claims as if not asserting, but persistently pursues its own policy and its own advantage? There, if the question be pressed severely, we shall fall at one stroke, and be taken captive instantly and completely.

Have we got rid of the larger evils? Then attention must be directed to what are known as minor evils—the little foxes, the little blotches upon the character, the small aberrations that require an eye of spiritual criticism to see that they are aberrations at all. We can draw a rough circle with a practised hand, but lay the compass upon it, and then see how defective it is when brought under the judgment of a true geometry. So we may in life do many things tolerably well, wonderfully well, so well as to attract attention and elicit commendation, but when the compasses of the sanctuary are laid upon our circles, the best of them is but a rough polygon; it is no circle at all. Yet to the eye it looks quite right. But what is the eye of the body? What can it see? What can it judge? It is dependent upon atmosphere and distance, and at the very best it is a lame judge of straight lines or circular lines. We must be judged by the spirit of the sanctuary, by the genius of the altar, by the Holy Ghost, and then so judged there is fire enough in the criticism to burn us as with the scorching of hell.

“Our vines have tender grapes.” In our life there are budding thoughts. Do we know what we do when we destroy a blossom? Who can measure the disaster? Who can compute the loss? It is in blossoming and budding time that we have to take great care: then the frost tells heavily, then the cold wind is very cruel, and the toiling insect seems to carry everything before it. So many of us have been cruelly used at budding time. We have had beautiful blossoms of character. Who cannot remember these? Once we nearly prayed; at one time men took notice of us that there was a new element in our character, and they expected us to become religious; but some little fox destroyed the tender grape, or some great enmity was discovered, and it fell upon us like a cold wind; some senior professor snubbed us, was unkind to us, did not understand us, so the blossom was

taken away, and where the blossom is destroyed what fruit can there be? Take care of first impressions, little budding thoughts, tender blossoms of moral aspiration, for in these are the beginnings of good character. Take care of the little things, the apparent trifles; the great main lines of character may be left to other influences and to broader culture. So then if we are called away to sunny places, to paradises, to fruitful gardens, there is difficulty, there is danger, and there is a need of discipline.

Again in chapter iii. 8 we have the same idea—"Every man hath his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night." Who expected to find these words in a love-song? We thought we had passed all the hard books of Scripture, and had now come into a garden of delights, a very paradise of love; yet here are military words. Who can escape the military and disciplinary part of life? To have a sword may be ornamental, to have a sword in the day-time may look well; but what of the sword never taken off, ready at night-time, ready for all the messengers of darkness? What about this aspect of life? Yet who does not know it? Who is not aware of the fact that he must never take his sword off night or day? Why not? Because of the unexpected visitations which distress our life, because of temptations which give no notice of their coming, because we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world. That is why! Do we part with our sword? Do we say, Surely at night-time there can be no need for the sword, so we will lay it aside, and commit ourselves to rest, and to dream, and sweet converse? The enemy overhears us; the enemy knows who has the sword on and who has laid the sword away. He is a wise enemy—skilful, penetrating, sagacious, unslumbering; we cannot fight him in our own wit and skill and strength; we need all heaven's help to strike that foe fatally on the head. So whilst we have been enjoying the beauty of the song, its rare music, and have simply given ourselves up to the swinging rhythm of the singer, we must now obey the same inspiration, and if it was worth while to follow him when he spoke highly and sweetly concerning love and treasure and peace and joy, we must also obey him when he speaks of care and watchfulness and discipline. And

as for this night-time, has God no care of it? Are there any Christian references to night-time in the New Testament? "At midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh": "The Son of man will come as a thief in the night." Has not God made use of the night-time? When did the song which we associate with the gospel make itself heard by the sons of men? At midnight there was an angel, and with the angel a great host, and the song sung in that star-time was, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Do not think, therefore, that God has no sanctuary in the darkness; do not suppose that God retires from the providence of life at sundown, and takes no heed of it until the sun rises again. If the enemy is abroad at night so is God; he neither slumbers nor sleeps; he gives no rest to his eyelids. The darkness and the light are both alike 'unto thee, thou living, all-seeing God. So we must keep the two sides of the case clearly before us. The enemy seems to rule the night, but he does not in reality. It would sometimes appear as if the field of darkness were left wholly to the great foe: not one single cloud of it but is under the dominion and hand and care and love of God. "Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne." He comes down upon the clouds; the clouds are the dust of his feet. Let no man, therefore, imagine that night indicates God's having forsaken the earth; it indicates rather the curtaining-in of the earth when it lies down to sleep in his infinite arms.

Notice another beautiful expression—"Behold king Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him" (iii. 11). Does that always mean something beautiful? Not always, as history has abundantly and painfully testified. Mothers have given crowns they had no right to give. Bad women have promised kingdoms to their husbands, and have succeeded in conferring those kingdoms upon them without title that could be justified, without one tittle of righteousness marking the whole process. Yet who has such right to give a crown to a son as a mother? What other crown is worth having? Behold, King Solomon, with the crown that his mother crowned him with. The image is beautiful, instructive, encouraging. What chances

the mother has ! she is always near ; she sees when the gate of the mind is ajar, and she can enter in, as it were, stealthily, with all the quietness and tenderness of patient love. How soon she can begin ! No other workman can be upon the ground so early as the mother. What questions are put to her ! What answers she may return ! Yet how soon is she forgotten ! Who remembers Bath-sheba except in connection with shame ? Surely it required some one to speak of her in connection with the coronation of her son. Life is a mixed quantity : we are bad, yet sometimes we pray ; we sin much, yet to-morrow we may touch the divine arm, and see the King in his beauty ; now scorched with hell, now blessed and calmed with all heaven's peace. True, we could go back and find out painful things in every history ; but who cares to do this mean work ? Who would live in such criticism ? Has the man, the woman, ever done any beautiful thing, spoken any sweet word, gone out in sacrifice ? has he, has she, been patient, thoughtful, unselfish, forgiving ? In the name of reason, conscience, righteousness, let us magnify these instances, and allow all other matters to fall away into forgetfulness.

“The crown wherewith his mother crowned him” (iii. 11) —the crown of love of truth, love of honour, love of service ; other crowns are trivial, other crowns are tinsel. The great Napoleon once said, “Who rocks the cradle rules the world.” When that is believed in all the scope of its significance we shall see reformation without injustice, revolution without violence, the quiet dawn which always typifies the greatest of renewals and the greatest of beginnings. When Plato saw a child do wrong he went instantly and rebuked the parent. Truly he was a wise philosopher ! Plato did not speak to the child ; he did not imagine the child had invented some new depravity ; he did not say, Thou art a genius in evil, thou hast found out quite a novel wickedness, and therefore I must address thee in thy personality. Without heeding the child he went and rebuked the parent. What a grasp of true wisdom he had ! what a conception of the mystery of heredity ! He was right. How can the parent draw himself up with pharisaic pride and rebuke the child ? The child is but the man reduplicated ;

the child owes its birth to the man who rebukes him. Is your child a drunkard? So were you, or, if not you, the one behind you. This child of yours never invented the game of intemperance: he is not a discoverer in the art of wickedness. But you say you never were a drunkard? Wait. Be not quite so sure of that. Not perhaps in the open, obvious, vulgar sense of the term; but recall what you have done in that way, how you accustomed yourself to almost miracles in the way of drinking and self-indulgence. You did it little by little; the process did not seem to tell upon you; or there were circumstances in your case which mitigated the effect of the poison as to the public eye and as to your own consciousness, but all the while the mischief went on, and it comes up in that son who gives you heart-ache day by day. Are your children incapable, nervous, irritable, difficult to manage and govern? Blame yourselves. You wasted your constitution in your youth. The child inherits what you laid up. Every nervous fit is something you ought to be sorry for, and something for which you ought to apologise to the child. There are many murders committed without any blood being shed. When will people know that every thought they think tells upon the next generation: that every bad thought that passes through the brain repeats itself in the coming time? When will men remember that they cannot stay out late at night doing evil things without the black seed coming up in a black harvest? You look at the child and say you are surprised, for you began this practice and that practice when you were in your teens; if it is a poison, it is a very slow poison, for it has had no effect upon you. Supposing that you have been rough enough, hard enough, to bear the process yourself, yet see the full effect of the thing in those who have come after you: the process does not end with you; it only began mayhap in your instance: you must follow it out to your children, and if you see them incapable, nervous, irritable, worldly, drunken, beastly, do not pull yourself up in some haughty pharisaic attitude and begin to lecture them—fall down in the dust, and say, God be merciful to me a sinner: I have murdered children! Blessed be God, the law tells also upon the other side. Every noble thought you think has an effect upon the little child. Every generous deed you did comes up in beauty on that child's sweet face; the child never would have

had such a visage but for your beneficence, pureness, religiousness ; if you had prayed less the child's countenance would have been less suggestive of the highest significance. "The way of the Lord is equal." If we have done evil, evil we shall reap ; if we have done good, our harvest shall be an abundance of good in return : "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." You have it not in your power, it may be, to leave your child gold. Thank God for the child that has little gold left. It is almost certain temptation ; it is almost probable ruin. Bless God that the little child has to count its fingers, and see how many it has which it can employ as instruments of honest labour. But you can leave your child a beautiful example ; you can so live that the child will be able to say, I never knew him do a mean thing ; I never knew her carried away with vanity and folly ; I have always known both the old folks sweet, kind, patient, long-suffering : God bless them. Epitaph they may have none in the churchyard, but they have an epitaph written upon the tablets of my heart. To work for such a speech is task enough for any angel.

One greater than Solomon is crowned. We read that on his head are many crowns. He deserves them all. He is Lord of all—

"Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown him Lord of All."

As for us, this is the rule : No cross, no crown ; no sword, no sceptre ; no storm, no calm. Thus a new view of the song comes before us. Hitherto we have been enjoying it as a piece of music ; now we must listen to it as a law, a call to duty, a warning, and yet a promise. If we suffer with Christ we shall also reign with him. "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." That is enough. We will think of the music, and think of the discipline ; we will remember the beauty, and not forget all the service ; we will think of the promise, and know that the promise lies on the farther side of the cross, and that they who bear the cross well shall wear the crown evermore.

Chapter iv. 8.

"Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon : look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards."

THE INVITATIONS OF CHRIST.

WE cannot understand the Song of Solomon until we completely master this verse. The whole song will be to us a romance, a hazy picture; invested indeed with great fascination of words, but wholly without definiteness of meaning until the spirit of this exclamation is really comprehended. This is the opinion of the most competent literal critics and also of the most gifted spiritual interpreters. The text ought to be set out in distinct black type, in the very middle of the Song, as indicating the centre of the life-music. The text might thus read in highest Oriental terms :—

"With me from Lebanon, O Bride, with me from Lebanon thou shalt come, shalt look around, or wander forth, from the height, or head, of Amana, from the height of Shenir and Hermon, from dens of lions, from mountain haunts of leopards,"

What is the idea? The text is orientally picturesque, but what is the spiritual notion of it which can be carried through all the ages of human spiritual civilisation? The idea is that the native home of the bride is situated in Northern Palestine, here set forth in image by four peaks, or hills. Lebanon represents the western range which overlooks the Mediterranean, and is here used as representing the whole mountain system, where wild beasts lodge and roam. The whole idea is that the Shulamite Virgin who is sought as a bride lives in high, craggy, cavernous regions—amid inhospitable scenes—and close to the mountain haunts of beasts of prey. Such words as Amana, Shenir, Hermon, and Lebanon are used to typify a region of mountain,

rock, fastness, forest, and jungle. There the fair Shulamite has her native home. That is one side of the picture. On the other side is the king, who lives in Jerusalem, the royal city, the city of peace, far away from the haunts of leopards; and he goes forth to invite the bride to leave the crag and the den, the forest and the danger, saying, as music might say it:—

“Come to me from Lebanon, O Bride,
 To me from Lebanon thou must come,
 Shalt wander forth from top of Amana,
 From summit of Shenir and Hermon,
 From lions' dens,
 From mountain haunts of leopards,”—

Come to Jerusalem, to the centre of civilisation, to the home of beauty, to the king's palace, to the splendid and inviolable home,—no lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast go up thereon,—come, O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, whose lips drop as the honeycomb, and the smell of whose garments is as the smell of Lebanon,—come! That is the attitude of the figures in this Oriental word-picture. This is the action of Christ in relation to the Church, which is his Bride; and the picture in every line corresponds with the ministry of Christ as set forth in the New Testament. This is the centre of the song,—the Shulamite far away on the crags and in the desert places of her native land, and the king sighing for her, calling her to come away from the desert, and all its inhospitableness, to the city and all its abundance of peace and joy.

How is all this sustained by collateral Scripture, and made to apply to the Son of God?

Christ calls men away from what may be regarded as the nativities of the present scene. The king in the olden time made this a condition of really and truly loving and trusting his bride—“Forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; so shall the king greatly desire thy beauty.” There must be no division, no holding on with both hands; the attitude must not be that of one who has the right foot in the caverns and the left foot in the metropolis: there must be a complete detachment from all that is native and original, and a clear coming away with all

trust and love and hope to the new abode. A hard thing to be called away from one's birth-place; but what is life if it is not hard? Where are the men who have been pampered in life? What are they worth in muscle, in brain, in power of endurance? How do they face the wind or breast the wave? If they are still living in their cradles, what has Time done for them? If they can only eat at the table of luxury and drink choice wine, what manliness is there in their character? All life, if we really understand it, is a being called away from the nativity to the new land, the new liberty. We talk amiss and use the words of folly when we speak about the hardness of leaving that which is native and original; it is the very thing which we must do if we would grow aright, and complete the purpose of God: all nature does it within the limits of her capacity; all summer is the larger land in which the seeds live that were so small and cold in the earlier time. Christ is calling us away from our animalism—the first condition of our birth. He will not have it that the body is the man, that the flesh is the immortal part of humanity. We seem to start upon that basis; we begin low down in the scale of being: but the very fact of our being in existence and invested with a moral nature is a call to us to throw off all that is low and inferior and mean and unworthy, and to ascend to the Jerusalem which is above. So Christ calls the Church, which is his Bride, the Lamb's Wife,—he calls her away from stony places, and from low associations, and from connections with lions' dens and mountain haunts of leopards,—calls humanity away from flesh, and earth, and time, and sense, and prison, into all the upper spaces, where the blue sky is unclouded, and where the infinite liberty never degenerates into license. This is the true conception of evolution, development, or progress: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature"—still a creature, but new in every desire, and ambition, and faculty, and purpose—"old things have passed away"—rolled under the horizon like night before the power of morning—and "all things have become new." Has man left his old home? Yes. Quitted, so to say, the land of his nativity? Yes, he has truly done so if he be in Christ Jesus. No man can follow the Saviour and yet remain at home. "Ye must be born again." We are by nature the children of wrath, even as others; and we live natively under a great black cloud of judgment, and

Christ calls us away, saying, If need be, cut off your right hand, pluck out your right eye ; take up your cross and follow me,—to me, from the land of mountains, and crags, and caverns, O come ! Blessed is he who answers, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. This is very hard, let us say again. So it is ; and therefore worth doing. To cut off the very earliest associations of life is very severe, but it is God's condition of real growth, true evolution, high, solid, blessed progress—"Ye cannot serve God and mammon." O poor little seed, thou canst not remain within thy shell and yet be a beautiful flower or a fruitful tree ; there must be a breaking up, a leaving, a coming away from home to get into a larger home, where the light never expires, and where every breeze that blows is rich with the odours of heaven. "Lord, I will follow thee ; but let me first—" No, I will not suffer thee one moment to do anything that would involve a return to type, a reversion to originality of circumstance and condition and environment,—come now, and come completely. That is a divine call. We probably would seek to modify the terms, to soften the tone often so imperative in which the King's commands are delivered, but it comes to this after all—"Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die." The act of crucifixion must precede the act of resurrection : we must leave all, and follow Christ, or we cannot have the resurrection and all that flows from that triumph over death.

What does Christ call us from ? Precisely what the Shulamite was called from—from stony places and desert lands and mountain fastnesses—from "desolation desolate." When does Christ ever call men from knowledge to ignorance ? from abundance of spiritual realisation to poverty and leanness of soul ? When does Jesus Christ ever offer men an inhospitable welcome ? The great offers of the Gospel are in such terms as these : Eat and drink abundantly, O beloved ! Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ! There is a tone of hearty welcome in all these invitations, and they are addressed to people who are living in a land where there is no fountain of living water, and where there is no table spread for the soul's mortal hunger. At this point the gospel separates itself from all other religions. Taking its words only as words, how noble they are in hospitality ! How generous in

their lavish offers of help and liberty and rest! Surely they are the words which the poor life needs, and when we hear them we answer through our tears of gratitude, Lord, how great is thy love!

We are called not only from desolateness, but from danger. The land of our nativity is sown thick with perils; the land of the flesh lies adjacent to hell. We have not left the body life: we are still within the devil's whisper, still within the spectral touch of a hand that can be very soft, but that can grip like hooks of steel. If we have not entered into the spirit-life, the faith-life, that higher life which sees the invisible and realises the eternal, then we are simply walking through perils without number, and as for seductiveness or subtlety or power of involving us in mischief and in suffering, no language can express the reality of the situation.

We are called not only from desolateness and from danger, but from incongruity. What a background was the mountain region to the fair and lovely Shulamite! Surely that fair dove was made for Jerusalem, and not for some region of caverns or mountain haunts of leopards. Save her! This sense of incongruity afflicts men who profess to be under the spell of refined and elevating taste. What shocks do men receive who profess to be refined and large in their culture! A musician feels as if he were staggering under a blow of insult when he hears a false note; an artist chancing to alight upon a fault in colour or in drawing covers his eyes that they may not be offended, so sensitive and dignified is my lord the artist. Is there no law of incongruity in morals, in spiritual relation? "What doest thou here, Elijah?"—why wanderest thou in these desert places, O thou child of the king, meant to adorn a palace? Why estranged and ragged and humiliated and debased, thou child of fortune? Explain the ghastly incongruity! Our contention as Christian teachers should be that as the law of incongruity is acknowledged in music, in art, in dress, in the very garnishing of a house, so we are supporting by the strongest common-sense and the broadest experience every appeal we make to men on the ground of moral incongruity. Why should the children of

the King go mourning all their days? Why should the sons of God be uttering laments, and give themselves into the hands of Giant Despair, when they might be singing songs all day, and keeping company with the angel of hope? Find a man of large mind in the midst of persons who have hardly any intellectual life, and you instantly say, What is the man doing there? he seems to be quite out of place. Find a person who has had opportunities of refinement and culture mingling sympathetically with men who know nothing of either, and you instantly infer, though you may not put the inference into words, that there is a sad explanation of the circumstances in which the person is found: you instantly feel that some fault has been committed, some law has been broken, some status has been morally forfeited; otherwise this association never could have been established. You are right. That is the feeling of the Lord Jesus Christ when he sees us wandering far, disobeying God, living the animal life, satisfied with the limits of the body: he mourns, and says in his lamentation, The soul has been killed; God's angel has been ill-treated, mayhap strangled, and is lying white, cold, dead, within that tenement of flesh: the man is a living tomb! Men of refinement, men of culture, men of pedantry, do not suppose that you can be shocked by incongruities and lapses and false relations, and yet that Jesus Christ can look upon a ruined world, and be satisfied to have a leprous earth swinging round the sun in company with stars that have never lost their first estate.

Christ ever calls men to home, to security, to honour. Herein he is like the man who seeks the Shulamite for his bride: he calls her to the palace, to Jerusalem, to all beauty and comfort and security. Jesus Christ says, "I go to prepare a place for you." When Jesus Christ prepares a place, who can describe its largeness, its beauty, its completeness? "Where I am, there ye shall be also;" and where he is heaven is. Can we be in that chamber of rejoicing without the wedding garment? Can we violate the congruity of the relations which he has in infinite wisdom determined? "In my Father's house are many mansions." That is a great name; the very name itself implies that we must be prepared for the habitation of houses large as mansions and rich as palaces. Who would enter there who is

defiled, unclean, false, a kinsman of dogs, and a bedfellow of that which is evil and rejected? There shall be no night there; there shall be no more death; the inhabitants of the city shall never say, I am sick; the walls are jasper, the pavement is gold: who could enter there who felt that he was but a living tomb, a guilty hypocrisy, a man without sympathy with the pure, the ineffable, the divine? But, there is on the road a cross? Yes; and, no cross, no crown. We cannot enter into the city unless we understand the cross, and die upon it. The cross is not an intellectual puzzle; it is a cross on which every man must be himself crucified with the Son of God. After the cross the crown—the pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. After the cross, the city in the midst of whose street, and on either side of the river, is the Tree of Life. “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.” “I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.” What of the others? “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” That is right. Under that judgment are the rocks of reason. But the holy sweet gospel for us to hear is this, that when Christ comes and calls us from Lebanon, and Amana, and Shenir, and Hermon, he calls us to his own Jerusalem, saying that he will show us the glory of God, and give us a habitation in the city whose light is like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. It is Christ who always offers, gives, approaches, with large proposals of liberty, purity, and immortality. He seeks us; we do not seek him; we love him because he first loved us. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man open the door, I will come in; the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost: this is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. We have nothing to offer him but our impurity, and when we offer it with contrition he takes it, casts it away, and replaces it with a white

robe of purity. He calls us to companionship, "Come to me," said the voice to the Shulamite. The text may be literally rendered without the "with"; for that word may be substituted the word "to," and then the text reads, "Come to me." Did Jesus Christ ever use such words? Did he not say, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"? His invitation is in the tone of the very agony of love. "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night." "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Hear his voice. He calls us as if he needed us, as if he could not be at rest without us: in the image of God created he man. We are by nature the children of wrath, even as others; but we are called to redemption, to forgiveness, to rest, to summer, to joy infinite as God's eternity. Blessed are they who hear the voice, and answer it with their hearts: say ye to such, It shall be well with him. And if in the last audit, the final summing up, it should appear after all that this pain, agony, capacity of suffering ends in nothing, then so be it; nothing has been lost: we gave high meanings to these sufferings, and in attributing these high significations to them we created for ourselves ineffable consolation; and now that all ends in cloud and darkness and night and silence, so be it; it is sad to think of. But if it should all end otherwise; if there is an outlet from the little to the great, from the finite to the infinite, from earth to heaven; if there is a great white throne; if there is a day of judgment and reckoning and destiny, then say ye to the righteous, It shall be well with him. To the wicked say, if you can, but say it with tears, It shall be ill with him.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thine eyes are continually upon our conduct; thou dost watch us, whether our vigilance towards thee be wakeful or not. We have reason to say day by day, Thou God seest us. The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself mighty on behalf of those who put their trust in him. All things are naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do; there is not a word on our tongue, there is not a thought in our heart, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. May we live under this impression, and may it be to us an impression full of graciousness and hopefulness, because of the purity of our desire and the constancy of our fidelity; may we be enabled to make our appeal unto God, saying, The Lord knoweth, and into his hand I commit my spirit. We bless thee that thine eyes are upon us, for thus thou dost make us of account; though our days are few, and our strength is but varied weakness, yet thou dost care for us with the solicitude of love, and watch us as if we were needful to thine happiness. May we always remember that thou hast shown thy greatest love to us in the gift of thy dear Son. Thou didst not spare him, but didst freely deliver him up for us all; and in that great gift all other gifts are included. If thou didst not spare thy Son, thou wilt not hold back anything that is needful for us. We live in this confidence. Much we desire that we do not possess; yet we have learned to know that our not possessing it is an advantage, and that poverty is better than wealth. Enable us to take this view of life; then shall we be quieted, calmed, yea, enriched with the peace of God which passeth understanding, and no man shall be able to take away from us the treasure of this tranquillity. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Once we were full of impatience and restlessness and discontent, but we have learned in whatsoever state we are therewith to be content. In whose school have we learned this lesson but in the school of Jesus Christ thy Son, our blessed and infinite Saviour? Our sins are very many, but where sin abounds grace doth much more abound: help us to turn the eyes of our despair from our own sin, and to look upon the grace that is in Christ Jesus; then shall despair become hope, and hope shall grow into assurance and triumph. Dry our tears when we are hard pressed by difficulty and storm, and heavy-laden with grief, and give us sleep at the end of the day, that in its dreamlessness we may forget our woe and take back our strength, and begin the next day's battle with all the hopefulness of renewed energy. Direct all our way; suffer none of our steps to slide; watch thou our lips and keep the door of our mouth; and at the end, when all the years have come and gone and the last knell is heard, may we have a sweet confidence, which no temptation can trouble, that when the Lord cometh it will be to call us to his home, his rest, his benediction. Amen.

CHAPTERS v.-viii.

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.

THE Song has a double action : sometimes the Church praises Christ, and sometimes Christ praises the Church. The most noticeable feature is that the praise on both sides is equal. Not one word does the Church say of Christ that Christ does not in his turn say of the Church. So there is no idolatry in Christian worship when that worship is directed to God the Son. God the Son does not take from the Church all praise and honour without returning to his Church a response which proves the dignity of the Church herself. The occasion is always double, or reciprocal. A worship that is unreturned would be idolatry ; but the worship that is returned in recognition and honour and love and benediction is a reflected and re-echoed love ; it is the very perfection of sympathy. An idol does nothing in return ; there is a short and easy test of idolatry. A wooden deity makes no reply ; it takes no interest in the worshipping or adoring life ; it may be said to receive all and give nothing in return. To pour out the heart to such an unanswering presence is simple and fruitless idolatry. This is not the relation in which Christ stands to his Church. It would be difficult to say whether the Church more praises Christ than Christ delights in the Church. He speaks of the Church as if he could not live without it. He redeemed it with his precious blood ; he comes to it for fruit, for blessing,—may we not add, for comfort to his own heart ? that he may see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied : he looks for beauty on our part, for all manner of excellence ; and when he sees it does he stint his praise, does he speak with merely critical and literal exactness ? Is there not a redundancy of recognition, as if he could never say too much in return for the worship we render him, and the service we conduct in his name and to his glory ? If we doubted this we should only have need to refer to the great rewards with which he crowns our humble, but sincere, endeavours : we cannot give any disciple of his a cup of cold water without receiving recognition from Christ ; we cannot watch one hour with him without feeling that, having had participation in his sufferings, we shall have also triumph in his resurrection.

Observe, therefore, the reciprocal action as between Christ in heaven and his Church on earth: how they love one another, and communicate with one another, and live in one another. This is the marvel of grace.

We may learn much from this Shulamite. This high privilege, this most sacred and tender joy, brings with it a reflection full of sadness. When the love is so tender, how sensitive it must be to neglect, or disobedience, or wavering! A love like that cannot be neglected with impunity. It is a solemn relation in which the Church stands to Christ: a breath may wound him; an unspoken thought may be a cruel treachery; a wandering desire may be a renewed crucifixion. To have to deal with such love is to live under perpetual criticism. Whilst the recognition is always redundant, yea, infinite in graciousness, yet even that species and measure of recognition may be said to involve a corresponding sensitiveness to neglect or dishonour. The very fact that our poorest service is looked upon with the graciousness of divine love also suggests that our neglect of that service leaves that love wounded and despondent.

Look at the case. The Church which goes into such rhapsodies of admiration as we find in the Canticles breaks down at one point. Whose love is it that gives way? It is not the love of Christ. When a break does occur in the holy communion, where does that break take effect? Look at the image in the fifth chapter. The Church is there represented as having gone to rest, and in the deep darkness a knock is heard at the door, and a well-known voice says: "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night" (v. 2.) What is the response of the Shulamite—or, as we should say, the Church? The answer is: "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?" Thus we are caught at unexpected times, and in ways we have never calculated. It is when we are asked to do unusual things that we find out the scope and the value of our Christian profession. How difficult it is to be equally strong at every point! How hard, how impossible, to have a day-and-night religion; a religion that is in

the light and in the darkness the same, as watchful at midnight as at midday; as ready to serve in the snows of winter as amid the flowers of the summer-time! So the Shulamite breaks down. She has been sentimentalising, rhapsodising, calling to her love that he would return to her; and now that he has come she says: "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on?" How hard for human nature to be divine! How difficult for the finite even to urge itself in the direction of the infinite! How impossible to keep awake all night even under the inspiration of love, unless that inspiration be constantly renewed by intercourse with heaven! Keep my eyes open at midnight, O thou coming One, and may I be ready for thee when thou dost come, though it be at midnight, or at the crowing of the cock, or at noonday: may I by thy grace be ready for thy coming!

The whole subject of excuses is here naturally opened up. "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on?" What a refrain to all the wild rhapsody! When the Shulamite cries that her loving and loved one may return, always add, I have put off my coat: how shall I put it on? I have laid myself down; how can I rise again to undo the door?—Oh that he would come at regular times, in the ordinary course of things, that he would not put my love to these unusual and exceptional tests: for twelve hours in the day I should be ready, but having curtained myself round, and lain down to sleep, how can I rise again? Thus all rhapsody goes down, all mere sentiment perishes in the using; it is undergoing a continual process of evaporation. Nothing stands seven days a week and four seasons in the year but reasoned love, intelligent apprehension of great principles, distinct inwrought conviction that without Christ life is impossible, or were it possible it would be vain, painful, and useless. Have we any such excuses, or are these complaints historical noises, unknown to us in their practical realisation? Let the question find its way into the very middle of the heart. There is an ingenuity of self-excusing, a department in which genius can find ample scope for all its resources. Who is guiltless in this matter? Who is there that never was called upon in his conscience to rise and do Christ's bidding under exceptional and trying circumstances? We may not have love making its

demands by the clock ; we must not have a merely mechanical piety that comes for so much and for no more : love is enthusiasm ; love is sacrifice ; love keeps no time ; love falls into no sleep from which it cannot escape at the slightest beckoning or call of the object on which it is fastened.

Shall we go a little into detail ? or do we shrink from the thumbscrew and the rack of cross-examination ? Will not pulpit and pew go down in a common condemnation ? The ailment that would not keep a man from business will confine him all day when it is the Church that requires his attendance, or Christ that asks him to deliver a testimony or render a sacrifice. Who can escape from that suggestion ? Who does not so far take Providence into his own hand as to arrange occasionally that his ailments shall come and go by the clock ? Who has not found in the weather an excuse to keep him from spiritual exercises that he never would have found there on the business days of the week ? How comes it that men look towards the weather quarter on the day of the Son of man ? It is not a little matter ; this is not a detail that is insignificant : within limits that might easily be assigned the detail is not worth taking notice of ; but even here we may find insight into character, revelation of spiritual quality, the measure of enthusiasm. We can only test ourselves by the criticism of our own day : it is in vain for us to say whether we should have risen or not when the knock came to the door, and the speaker said that his head was filled with dew and his locks with the drops of the night ; into such romantic circumstances we cannot enter ; but there are circumstances by which we can be tested and tried, and by which we can say to ourselves definitely, Our prayer is a lie, and our profession a rhapsody. It is not enough that we should be usual, regular, mechanical ; that we should have a scheduled order of procession, whereby a duty shall come at a given hour, and be discharged at an indicated time. We are not hirelings ; we ought not to be mere slaves, serving as men-pleasers serve in the domestic and commercial circles ; we should be slaves in the sense of love that keeps nothing back, that delights in its golden chains, because every link binds the soul more closely and tenderly to the infinite heart of the universe. Where do we begin to economise ? do we

begin in the region of luxury? Where is there a man who can truthfully say that when he begins to economise he begins in the wine-cellar? Where is there a Christian man, how rhapsodic soever his piety—and the more rhapsodic the less likely—who can say that when he economises he begins by putting a bridle upon his own appetites and indulgences and worldliness: and that before he will take anything from Christ the last rag must be stripped from his own back? Yet how we sing, how we praise the hymn, how we admire the poet, how we ask him to go higher in his ascriptions and to be broader in his consecrations! Alas, if it be all rhapsody! We shall never know whether it is so or not by mere argument. What have we done? How often have we risen at midnight to help the poor, the helpless, the lost? Of how many meals have we denied our hunger that we might help a hunger greater than our own? How often have we put ourselves out of the way to do that which is good, benevolent, and helpful? Not what have we done by regulation and schedule, and bond and stipulation, and the like; but what irregular service have we rendered, what unusual devotion have we paid? These are the questions that try us like fire; these are the inquiries that mow down our rhapsody and sentiment, and soon discover how much there is left in the field of life for that which is good and solid and useful.

But the Church will repent: the Shulamite will cry; yea, the tears will burst from her eyes, and she will go out after she has had a fit of reflection. Let her go! "I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved; but——" we saw in how awful a relation the soul stands in regard to Christ; we saw how hard a thing it is to live clearly up to the point of that infinite affection of his—"but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone." When he goes, who can measure the emptiness which he leaves behind? Hear the sad word—"gone." What is there left? Only emptiness, nothingness, disappointment, mortification,—now cry and spare not thy tears, thou indolent Shulamite who did not spring to answer the call that was made by him whose head was filled with dew, and whose locks were heavy with the drops of

the night! What a picture of forsakenness! He was *gone*—“My soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.” Has he not left a shadow behind? No. Is there not a sound of his retreating footfall in the night air by which the forsaken one may discover at least the direction in which wounded love has gone? No. Herein we stand in jeopardy every hour. Let the Shulamite now examine her reasons, and she says, I would not rise to put on a garment, and therefore I have lost him who is fairest among ten thousand and altogether ever lovely; I would not put myself to any inconvenience, and therefore I have lost the king and his heaven. Strip all this soliloquy of its orientalism, and still there remains the solid time-long fact, that to neglect an opportunity which Christ creates is to lose the Christ who graciously created it. “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in”: “Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.” Did not the disciples sleep in the garden? Are we not all sometimes overborne with sleep? Is Christ, then, harsh with us? No: yet only by these forsakings can he get at some of us, so to say, with anything like healthful and permanent effect: argument is exhausted; appeal is lost. The ministry of abandonment plays an important part in the dispensation under which we live. We must be left to ourselves awhile; we must be given to feel how great a thing is the light which we do not value or which we neglect to use. When the light goes what is left? A great burden of darkness. And what does darkness mean? It means imprisonment, destruction. Darkness practically destroys every picture that the hand of skill ever painted; the night roots out all the flowers of summer, so far as their visibleness is concerned. Darkness undoes, limits, appals, imprisons. There is no jail like the darkness. In other prisons you may try to find crevices in the wall, flaws in the building that may be turned to advantage; but in the darkness there are no flaws, it is a great wall which cannot be broken up by our poor human strength: if we should strike a momentary light in its midst it would only be to discover that the prison is vaster than we had at first supposed. When Christ leaves the soul, the soul is sunk in night. Not one ray of light has it of its own. All it can do is to cry bitterly, penitently,

contritely ; but all the crying of the gathered distress and agony of the world cannot dispel the darkness of night.

The Shulamite went forth, and was wounded by strange hands. "The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me ; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me" (v. 7). Poor Church ! That is thy lot when away from Christ ! The world hates the Church ; the world only awaits an opportunity to wound the Church. This is not only circumstantial ; it is philosophical, it is necessary, it is inevitable : there is no communion or congeniality between them ; they live in different universes, they are lighted by different flames—one the eye of day, the other the baleful fire of hell. The worldly man cannot esteem the Christian. It is a difficult lesson to learn. The Christian is more frequently deceived upon this point than is the worldly man. The Christian speaks of his geniality, his neighbourliness, his evident disposition to return courtesies and to live upon friendly terms. There can be no friendly terms between the soul that prays and the soul that never prays ! What communion hath Christ with Belial, or light with darkness ? Not that the Christian may set himself in hostility against the world in so far as it would prevent his having an opportunity of revealing the kingdom of heaven. Certainly not. That, indeed, would be unwise generalship, that would be obviously insane and absurd piety ; we are now speaking of the solemn fact that if the world should get the Church into its power, the world would wound the Church and kill it ; if Christ were to descend the world would slay him every day in the week : and so doing the world is acting logically ; it is in perfect sequence with itself ; the inconsistency is not in the world. What if there be less inconsistency in the world than in the Church ?

There is one expression to which allusion may be made : "Jealousy is cruel as the grave : the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame" (viii. 6). There is an unreasoning and unjust jealousy. There is a jealousy which every man ought to condemn and avoid as he would flee from the very spirit of evil. But there is a godly jealousy. "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God" : "Thou shalt worship no other God :

for the Lord whose name is Jealous is a jealous God." The Apostle Paul avails himself of this same sentiment when he says : " For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy : for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." When we condemn jealousy we must understand the direction in which jealousy operates. Let us never forget that there is a jealousy which is born of the very pit of perdition ; but let us be jealous for truth, jealous for honour, jealous for domestic sanctities, jealous for mutual reputation. Let us feel that what injures a brother injures us. Never let us forget that when one minister is spoken against the whole ministry is involved. Do not imagine that some particular minister can be the object of jealousy without the whole brotherhood to which he belongs being in some degree involved in the tremendous blasphemy against human rights and human liberties. *There* is a fine scope for jealousy, if we want to be jealous, and if we are endowed with a jealous disposition. Let us beware of the serpent Jealousy : it will destroy our home, our love, our life ; it will turn the sweetest, purest cream into the deadliest poison ; with the fumes of hell it will mingle the incense of piety. It is the perversion of a sublime sentiment, and is without either the dignity of justice or the serenity of reason. " It doth work like madness in the brain." We must be jealous of ourselves, and not of others. *There* is a fine range for jealousy—for a man to sit jealously in judgment upon his own motives, and desires, and aspirations, and to be severe with himself. That is the way to become gracious to others. Let us be jealous of our jealousy ; be jealous of our prayerlessness, our illiberality, our mean and despicable excuses. Along that line our jealousy may burn with advantage, but along every other line its proper figure is that of a fiend, and its only passion is thirst for blood. But we should not have jealousy excluded from the action of the Shulamite or from the spirit of Christ, wherein jealousy means regard for the principles of love, the integrity of honour, the flawlessness of loyalty, the completeness of consecration.

How healthful is the lesson, and what a range of application it has—namely, let us be jealous in regard to ourselves. Let us say to the self-saving self, This is diabolical on your part, and

ought to be punished with the heat of hell. When in the morning we would escape from religious discipline that we may mingle with the greater eagerness in the dissipation of the world, let us stop ourselves and say, Bad man, disloyal man, you have robbed God! What a field for jealousy! When we have neglected the poor and hungry, and listened not to the cause of those who had no helper, then let us be jealous of ourselves, and punish ourselves with anticipated hell. This would be a life full of discipline, but full of blessedness; it would check all evil-speaking, put an end to all malign criticism, and constrain the soul towards all graciousness and gentleness of judgment with others, for it would show others to advantage, and compel us to say, Compared even with them, how poor a figure we cut! To be severe with ourselves is the surest way to prepare for being gentle with our fellow-creatures. I keep myself under; I smite myself in the eyes, lest having preached to others I myself should be a castaway,—so said the chief of us all, the loyalest, noblest Christian that ever followed the Saviour; and if he, so mentally strong and spiritually rich, needed so much self-discipline, what do we need, who feel how small we are and frail, and how easily we are moved about by every wind of doctrine and by every subtle temptation? My soul, hope thou in God!

THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH.

Note.—THE REV. GEORGE ADAM SMITH, M.A., has published a magnificent work on Isaiah. It is overflowing with information, whilst its literary style is absolutely enchanting. I wish all students and preachers could have a copy of this invaluable treatise. It occupies totally different ground from that traversed by the PEOPLE'S BIBLE. In a sense the one supplements the other; though in my opinion Mr. SMITH's work stands far above all others in erudition, in historical insight, and in spiritual perception of proportion and colour. I have instructed my Editor to enrich the following pages with illustrative extracts.—J. P.

A CATECHETICAL NOTE.

- Q. In what reigns did Isaiah prophesy ?
A. In the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah.
- Q. Who were some of his official contemporaries ?
A. Hosea, Amos, and Jonah, in the kingdom of Israel, and Micah in the kingdom of Judah. Micah and Obadiah are also supposed to have been contemporary with Isaiah.
- Q. Is much known about the prophet's life ?
A. No. His father's name was Amoz.
- Q. Is that the same as Amos ?
A. No. In Hebrew and Greek the two names are spelled alike, and for this reason some of the Fathers, who were unacquainted with Hebrew, thought the names referred to one man.
- Q. What is known about Isaiah domestically ?
A. He was married, and he designated his wife a prophetess. Two of his sons are mentioned under their names of Shear-jashub, and Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Isaiah wore a garment of hair-cloth, as did Elijah and John the Baptist.

- Q. Is anything more than his Prophecy assigned to the authorship of Isaiah?
- A. Yes. A biography of King Uzziah, and a biography of King Hezekiah.
- Q. Is there any evidence that Isaiah was familiar with other portions of sacred Scripture?
- A. Yes. He alludes to Eden and Noah (li. 3; liv. 9), to Abraham and Moses (xli. 8; lxiii. 11, 12), to Sodom and Gomorrah (i. 9; xiii. 19); and many allusions would have been impossible but for a wide knowledge of the Book of Proverbs. It is not disputed that Isaiah was well read in the Book of Job.
- Q. Does Isaiah show any signs of a wider culture?
- A. Yes. Probably some knowledge of medicine (i. 6; xxxviii. 21), and some acquaintance with the religion and history of the great kingdoms contending for the sovereignty of the East (xviii. 2; xix. 11-13; xxiii. 12, 13; xlvi. 1). He must have read much or heard much of Egypt, Zoan, Noph, and Pathros; also of the rivers of Ethiopia and the seven streams of the Delta; he was familiar, too, with many Moabite cities.
- Q. How old was Isaiah at the beginning of the reign of Hezekiah?
- A. He is supposed to have been over sixty.
- Q. How are the prophecies of Isaiah generally divided?
- A. They have been divided by competent criticism thus:—
- (a) Chapters i.-xxxv. : Prophetic writings from the death of Uzziah to the closing years of Hezekiah.
 - (b) Chapters xxxvi.-xxxix. : A historical appendix to this collection.
 - (c) Chapters xl.-lxvi. : A systematic collection of prophecies referring centrally to the deliverance of the Jews from Babylonian captivity.

Chapter i. 1-17.

ACCUSATIONS.

IT is a living man who speaks to us. This is not an anonymous book. Much value attaches to personal testimony. The true witness is not ashamed of day and date and all the surrounding chronology; we know where to find him, what he sprang from, who he is, and what he wants.

"The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" *¹(ver. 1).

This man is a speaker. Has the speaker any function in society? Does the man of sentences, of eloquence, play any part in the education of the age? Isaiah defines the part he is about to attempt; he says he will first of all accuse the times of degeneracy. This is not a grateful task. More loudly would he be welcomed who came to pronounce a eulogy upon the age. But Isaiah was characterised by intense and invincible reality. He will be an iconoclast; nothing will be spared by the iron rod of his vengeance: yea, though they be gods, they shall go down; though they be idols well cared for they shall be smitten as if they were common clay. This is a chapter of denunciation,

* "The first chapter of the Book of Isaiah owes its position not to its date, but to its character. It was published late in the prophet's life. The seventh verse describes the land as overrun by foreign soldiery, and such a calamity befell Judah only in the last two of the four reigns over which the first verse extends Isaiah's prophesying. In the reign of Ahaz, Judah was invaded by Syria and Northern Israel, and some have dated chapter i. from the year of that invasion, 734 B.C. In the reign, again, of Hezekiah some have imagined, in order to account for the chapter, a swarming of neighbouring tribes upon Judah; and Mr. Cheyne, to whom regarding the history of Isaiah's time we ought to listen with the greatest deference, has supposed an Assyrian invasion in 711, under Sargon. But hardly of this, and certainly not of that, have we adequate evidence, and the only other invasion of Judah in Isaiah's lifetime took place under Sennacherib, in 701. For many reasons this Assyrian invasion is to be preferred to that by Syria and Ephraim in 734 as the occasion of this prophecy."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A.

with which is strangely inwrought figures of mercy and tones evangelical. My song shall be of judgment and mercy!

Isaiah personates the divine Being as accusing Judah and Jerusalem:—

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me” (ver. 2).

Instead of “children” say “sons”—“I have nourished and brought up sons”—not a mixed family, but all sons; so to say, all eldest sons, all equal sons, without favour or specialty of advantage—“and they have rebelled against me.” Sometimes we imagine that the fatherhood of God is a New Testament revelation; we speak of the prophets as referring to God under titles of resplendent glory and overpowering majesty, and we set forth in contrast the gentler terms by which the divine Being is designated in the new covenant. How does God describe himself in this chapter? Here he claims to be father: I have nourished and brought up *sons*—not, I have nourished and brought up slaves—or subjects—or creatures—or insects—or beasts of burden—I have nourished and brought up sons: I am the father of creation, the fountain and origin of the paternal and filial religion. “And they have rebelled against me.” In what way have they rebelled? We must come to particulars. We find those particulars in the fourth verse—“Ah! sinful nātion.” The word “ah” is not an interjection, indicating a mere sighing of pity or regret; the word should not be spelt as it is here, the letters should be reversed, it should be “ha,” and pronounced as expressive of indignation. God does not merely sigh over human iniquity, looking upon it as a lapse, an unhappy thing, a circumstance that ought to have been otherwise; his tone is poignant, judicial, indignant, for not only is his heart wounded, but his righteousness is outraged, and the security of his universe is threatened,—for the universe stands in plumb-line, in strict geometry, and whoever trifles with the plumb, with the uprightness, tampers with the security of the universe. “A people laden with iniquity;” so that you cannot add another element to the heavy burden: genius cannot invent an addition. “A seed of evildoers;” not a mere progeny, as if the force of heredity could not be resisted and therefore fate must be accepted, but a house of evildoers—

that is to say, all the evildoers having grouped themselves to keep house together—a whole houseful of bad men. “Sons that are corrupters”; sons that are as cankerworms; sons that throw poison into pellucid water streams; sons that suggest evil thoughts to opening minds. What have they done? They have done three things. It is no general accusation that is lodged against Judah and Jerusalem, and through them against all the nations of the earth; it is a specific indictment, glittering with detail. “They have forsaken the Lord.” By so much their action is negative: they have ceased to attend the altar; they have neglected to read the holy writing; they have turned their backs upon that towards which they once looked with open face and radiant eye. Next, “they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger.” Observe how the intensity increases, how the aggravation deepens and blackens: “they have forsaken;” “they have provoked;” they have grown bold in sin; they have thrown challenges in the face of God; they have defied him to hurl his thunderbolts and his lightnings upon them. “They have provoked the Holy One of Israel.” That is the key of Isaiah’s whole revelation—“the Holy One of Israel.”

The book of Isaiah is divided into two parts: in the first part “the Holy One of Israel” is a phrase which is used some fourteen times; in the second part it is used sixteen times. “The Holy One of Israel” is the key of Isaiah’s whole religious position. His was a majestic mind; specially was that majesty invested with highest veneration. God is not to him a mere conception; he is “the Holy One of Israel”—the one holy, the only holy. Every man has his own God, in the sense of having his own conception or view of God. There are as many conceptions of God as there are men to conceive of God. Here is a mystery, and yet a joy. When men compare their several conceptions of God one with another they make each other’s hearts ache. To what mind does it ever occur that the multitude of conceptions of God is due to the wondrousness and infinite glory of the God who is thought about? Were he himself less it would be easier to comprehend him, and represent him in one formula; but seeing the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain him, where is the word-house you will build for him, where is the creed-tabernacle in

which you will confine him as in a prison? Isaiah thought of God as "the Holy One of Israel," and in this connection he beholds that Holy One under the action of provocation. So far then we have two specific charges: first, "they have forsaken"; secondly, "they have provoked": now there remains a third detail in the great indictment—"they are gone away backward." They forsook, they provoked, they apostatized. Sin has its logical course as well as holiness. There is a method in madness as well as a method in reason. Men do not stand still at the point of forsaking God: having for a little while forsaken him, they will find it almost necessary to provoke him, that they may justify themselves to themselves and to others, saying, Even provocation cannot awaken the judgment of heaven with any sign of impatience; and having provoked the Holy One of Israel, the next point will be universal apostasy, a thorough off-casting of the last traces and semblances of religion. See if this be not so in the history of the individual mind. We do not pass from the Church to perdition always at one great leap. There is a course in which men move towards their ruin: it is a well-beaten course; it is a turn-pike that cannot be mistaken in all the religion of time and history. First of all is given up all week-night attendances or week-day services; after the week-day passes the Sabbath morning or the Sabbath evening. The process has begun; it will end in death! Every doctor who visits the patient will say, There is no hope; this man is death-bound; he will land in hell. But why speak so? He has but forsaken, withdrawn, given up. Certainly, that is all he has done at present; but there is a law of gravitation, spiritual as well as physical, and now the man who has begun by forsaking will end by going backward, his whole life thrown out of order, decentralised; and he perpetrates the irony of walking backwards, and his crab-like action will bring him to the pit.

Isaiah having these real conceptions was a fire among the people. He was not a namby-pamby teacher, a man who would exchange compliments and courtesies, and say that after all there is an average of morality, and one man is not much superior to another. He did not come along that line at all; he came from talking with the Holy One of Israel, and his face burned like a fire, and his voice was enlarged with thunder. He will do something

in his age. Such men are not to be put down. How he changes his tone into one of remonstrance and expostulation ! He says, "Why should ye be stricken any more ?" God will never give up striking until you give up sin : you cannot outwear the Infinite, you cannot compete with the eternal ; law never gives over. How will you, poor children of a day, creatures of an hour, compete with that which is infinite and everlasting ? Now Isaiah was, like all other prophets, not only a seer, but a physician. You will find in his description, or diagnosis, of the case a physician's knowledge and a physician's technicality. He says, You are vitally wrong, organically out of health : the whole head is sick, the whole heart is faint : the chief members of your constitution are wrong. It is a question of the head and the heart. Not, The foot has gone astray, and the hand has been playing an evil game, or some inferior member of the body has given hint of restlessness and treason ; but, The head, where the mind abides, is sick ; the heart, continually keeping the life-current in action, is faint and cannot do its work. Until you see the seriousness of the case you cannot apply the right remedies. This is the accusation which is brought by the prophets of heaven. They do not come to complain that some little error has been committed, or some passing ailment is troubling the human constitution ; whether they were right or wrong, they set themselves in this attitude : every head is sick, and every heart is faint ; from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it ; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores. Let us have a right diagnosis at the beginning. Some are clever in minutely describing a disease ; they seem to have the power of looking behind, and indicating with precision everything that is wrong in substance and wrong in action. We go to such men that we may really know what the matter is, and there is no appeal from their learned and experienced criticism. Isaiah, however, was not only good at diagnosis, but good also in therapeutics. He says, "They have not been closed"—physicians admire that language ; it is so precise—"neither bound up"—another point of admiration—"neither mollified with ointment." This is a man talking who understands about disease, and about what is necessary for its cure. It is not enough to know we are diseased, though the poet is right when he says,

"To know oneself diseased is half the cure,"—that is to say, it excites concern, it leads men to thoughtfulness and to inquiry, and probably into practical courses that may end in healing. Is this true of human nature? Do not consult the sanguine poet, for he takes a roseate view of everything: he sees in leprosy only the beauty of its snowiness; he looks upon the green mantling pool, and sees nothing there but some hint of verdure. Do not consult the gloomy pessimist, for at mid-day he sees nothing but a variety of midnight, and in all the loveliness of summer he sees nothing but an attempt to escape from the dreariness of winter. But consult the line of reason and solid fact, or undeniable experience, and what is this human nature? Can it be more perfectly, more exquisitely described than in the terms used by the prophet in the fifth and sixth verses of this chapter? Do the poor only fill our courts of law? Are our courts of justice only a variety of our ragged schools? Is sin but the trick of ignorance or the luxury of poverty? Or the question may be started from the other point: Are only they who are born to high degree guilty of doing wrong? Read the history of crime, read human history in all its breadth, and then say if there be not something in human nature corresponding to this description. Do not be vexed in your pursuits, and troubled and fretted by merely theological definitions, but ask after having read fifty volumes of the history of human crime whether there be not great truth in the indictment—"From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment." Unless we have a right conception of human nature we shall never have a right conception of Christ's work. We cannot understand the Cross until we understand the crime: we cannot begin to see the mercy until we have seen the sin.

But even in this indictment there is an evangelical tone, there is the beginning of a great remonstrance, expostulation, and proposal. What a sweet word is in the ninth verse:—

"Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah."

My song shall be of mercy and judgment! "Except the Lord

of hosts had left unto us——” Then you may fill up the verse according to present history, or personal experience, or individual recollection. The beginning of our speech is provided for us ; it opens thus, “Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us”—or given us—or provided for us—or interposed for us. The divine action explains the turns which human history has taken in the direction of recovery or redemption, or any form of restoration. Except the Lord of hosts had come with the morning, it had perished, it had perished even whilst it was dawning ; except the Lord of hosts had taken up the little child, and warmed the little life at the infinite heart, it had died ; except the Lord of hosts had come into the house when the harvest was a heap and the day was a multitude of sorrows, the tempest had crushed in the roof, and put out the household fire ; except the Lord of hosts had done¹ this or that, we had stumbled into darkness and fallen into ruin.

And now begins a great revolution. The challenge is :—

“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me ? saith the Lord : I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts ; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts ? Bring no more vain oblations ; incense is an abomination unto me ; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with ; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts [or fasts] my soul hateth : they are a trouble unto me ; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you : yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear : your hands are full of blood ” (vers. 11-15).

Is God, then, condemning the very ceremonies which he may have himself instituted ? Nothing of the kind. He is only condemning them because they are used by men whose hearts are no longer in them. The liturgy may be the finest expression of the language in which it is written ; it may be comprehensive in thought, eloquent in diction, pious in spirit ; but when lying lips utter it the Lord says, Take it away ; it wearies me : pious words without pious hearts constitute an irony which I cannot tolerate. We are not to consider that oblations, incense, new moons, Sabbaths, calling of assemblies, and appointed feasts, were condemned in themselves, and were ruthlessly abrogated ; we are to

consider that they had been abrogated by their false professors. He makes a nullity of the church who comes to it and leaves his heart outside. He makes the altar a laughing-stock who bends his knee but not his heart. Rend your hearts, and not your garments. God will have nothing to do with unreality, heartless ostentation, pomp and circumstance of worship : God abhors the sacrifice where not the heart is found. It is needful to remember all this, at least in some of the phases of its suggestion, lest men should come to a passage of this kind, and say, See how all formality, institutionalism, ceremonialism, and ritualism have been driven out of the sanctuary : God himself has cursed them, and abolished them. Nothing of the kind. They were cursed by the men who used them ; they were practically abolished by the men who turned them into a cloak under which to conceal the very genius of evil. We still need institutions, churches, Bibles, altars, helps and auxiliaries of every kind, and shall do so as long as we are in the body ; but let us take heed how we use them. To read the Bible without the Biblical spirit is to mock its inspiration. To profess Christ without living Christ is to crucify the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. Christianity gives infidelity any hold it may have upon human attention. Christianity could have outbuilt infidelity, could have shamed it away, could have made it almost equal to murder when it charged a Christian with anything that was wrong. Christianity could so have operated in society that if any man whispered one word against it the very spirit of judgment would have burned the air in which he whispered. If we have left the building standing but have expelled the divinity which glorified it ; if we maintain the shell after we have extracted the kernel ; if we hold up the name when the substance has been taken away—then do we tell lies to society ; then may we write *Ichabod* upon the door which hides our desolation ; then may we say to the mocker, *Mock on, for we are but dead men*

What then is to be done ?

"Wash you, make you clean ; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes ; cease to do evil ; learn to do well ; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow " (vers. 16, 17).

That is the new ritualism ; that is the new programme. Look at two points. "Relieve the oppressed." Literally the words might

read from the other point of view, and would then stand thus : Correct the oppressor. It is of little use to relieve the oppressed until you kill the tyrant. You are but offering temptations to the oppressor when you take under your patronage his victims. It is right that they should be cared for ; in fact, unless they are cared for there is no Christianity in the case, but the real thing to do is this : whilst relieving the oppressed, correct the oppressor ; put manacles on the hands of the tyrant, put fetters upon his feet, and chastise him with the rod of righteousness. "Judge the fatherless." Let the judge become an advocate ; then the advocate will be a judge. This is what we have to be and to do in the great Church of Christ. The judge seated on the bench is to be the advocate to whom the fatherless can look, saying to him, You know my case ; speak for me : you have words ; I have none ; you know how to state the reasons : take up my cause for me. And then the judge shall be advocate, and the advocate shall be no longer a paid hireling to prove that wrong is right, or make the worse appear the better cause. When called upon to plead for the fatherless, to judge the fatherless, the orphan, the homeless, then his eloquence will be touched. Hear how he halts, stumbles, hesitates when he expounds an old black-letter law for which he cares nothing : how poor he is when challenged by the spirit of pedantry ! but let an orphan appeal to him, let a widow who cannot speak for herself commit her case to him ; then see how he rises in stature, flames into sacred fire, and speaks as if he were pleading for his own life. That is the enthusiasm which the love of Christ enkindles ! "Plead for the widow." The very word "widow" comes from an ancient term which signifies *dumbness*—a woman who cannot speak for herself ; she is made silent by grief, or she is speechless because she has no status in the court. "Plead for the widow" : be a mouth to her, an eloquent tongue to her silence : she cannot speak, you must speak for her : accept her brief and relinquish her fee. Then will heaven clear away the clouds from its kind face, and there will come back again all summer, all beauty, all love.

PRAYER.

O THOU Christ of the living God, thou didst die for men ; yea, whilst they were yet sinners thou wast crucified, buried, and raised again, that they might obtain through faith eternal salvation. This is the love of God ; this is the appeal of heaven to the children of time. How gracious the invitation ! how tender every tone of the Father's speech ! how yearning the solicitude that broods over us ! May we hear the gospel voice, and answer it with our love ; may we know how much we need the Saviour ; may all attempts at self-help and self-redemption be abandoned as falsehoods and impossibilities : with one consent may the nations turn to Christ and to his Cross, seeking cleansing only through the blood of his sacrifice, and finding peace only through him who is our reconciliation. Being justified by faith, we have peace with God. Jesus Christ has answered the law ; he has filled up all that was needful, all that was lacking ; he came to seek and to save that which was lost : he has found us, he has brought us home rejoicingly, and there has been joy in the presence of the angels of God over repentant and returned sinners. May none be left behind ; may not one perish in the wilderness : may the last be brought in as the first, and may thy flock be thus completed, O Shepherd of Israel, O Pastor of the universe. We bless thee for a gospel which we need so much. We need it most when the night is darkest, when the temptation is severest, when the enemy is cruellest, when all sense of self-help abandons us, and when we are cast upon the mercy of the living God : then how great the gospel, how gracious the redeeming speech, how ample the provision made for sinners, how free—how infinite the forgiveness of God ! May we all cease to do evil, learn to do well, betake ourselves to those Christian activities which are binding upon Christian souls ; and having served our day and generation on this side the vale may we pass beyond the cloudy screen, and there look upon all that has been waiting for us with the patience of eternity, and with the confidence of love. Amen.

Chapter i. 16, 17.

EXHORTATIONS.

"Wash you, make you clean ; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes ; cease to do evil ; learn to do well ; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow " (vers. 16, 17).

HOW easy to say " Cease to do evil " ! Have we considered how much is meant by these words ? Does evil get so slight a hold upon a man that he can detach the hand that

grasps him without effort or difficulty? By what image would we represent the hold which evil gets upon men? Is it the image of a chain, a manacle, a fetter? Has it in it anything of the nature of a heavy burden, a weight that drags the life down to the very ground? Is it a tyranny that defies the poor little strength of man, and laughs at the victim when he attempts his freedom? Is evil kind to those who practise it? Is it most gracious in its mastery? Or does it taunt, and mock, and threaten, and defy? Can it be truthfully represented as a spectre that terrifies men in the darkness, a goblin that looks at them frowningly when they attempt to pray? If there is any suggestion of truth in all these inquiries—and human experience alone can reply—how easy it is to say, "Cease to do evil"! The man who is exhorted might reply, I cannot: the master whom I serve is a tyrant: if I even sigh as an indication of my suffering he doubles my punishment. Oh wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? Who shall cut away from me this cold corpse that I am doomed to carry? Herein perhaps we have not been sufficiently kind to men who are in a negative period of education, men who are simply trying to abstain, to refrain from evil, to cut down evil little by little because they feel they cannot cut it off all at once. To such men we should ever reveal an aspect of the tenderest graciousness, and when we speak to them our voice should be musical with tones of encouragement. It is a long leap from hell to heaven. The devil is no easy taskmaster; if he allows us to go one inch from him it is that he may leap upon us with deadlier certainty of his hold. Still, the exhortation is needed, and all Biblical exhortations bring with them their own assurance of divine interposition and divine succour; they are not mere exhortations, vocal cries, efforts in words. Whenever a man is exhorted in the Bible to cease from evil and to attempt good, the meaning is that God is behind the exhortation to afford needful inspiration and grace, if the man will himself ask for help, and cast himself unreservedly upon it.

What is the evil which a man is called upon to cease to do? Every man must answer this question for himself. Almost every one can find some kind of virtue easy to practise, but every one

has his own special and all but ineradicable evil, following him, stamping him, sealing him, and defying him to throw it off. Is any one conscious of being engaged at this moment in denying a craving for some personal indulgence, be it the draught of poison, the draught of death? How far have you proceeded? If you have proceeded so far as to make up your mind that it would be well to cease that evil, take heart: that is the first good, solid, upward step; that resolution is itself a rock on which you may stand. Now can you conquer all at once? The answer is, Certainly not, in many cases at least. There have been stupendous and successful efforts which have had about them at the first all the characteristics and qualities of completeness; but let not those be discouraged who have to try again, to fight more desperately to-day than they had to fight yesterday. Is it a consciousness of being hardly able to speak without the utterance of profane language? Cease to do evil: there was less profanity in the speech to-day than there was the day before: be hopeful, be on your guard; say, Lord, keep thou the door of my lips, set a watch upon my mouth. So these are but indications. Whatever the evil is, know that it must be fought out, put in its right relation to your life, and that it is impossible for you to cease to do evil except with the co-operation, the inworking spiritual ministry of God the Holy Ghost. How is that to be obtained? Ask, and ye shall receive. Seek, and ye shall find.

“Learn to do well”—or, to do good. Then does not good-doing come natively, as breathing does, or locomotion, or sight? Is this a trade to be learned? Do men serve an apprenticeship to good-doing? In ■ sense they do. All this is matter of education. And how wonderfully education spreads its necessities over the whole space of human life! You find it everywhere, on the very lowest levels, and on the very highest. We see what the author has produced, but we do not see what he has destroyed. The book comes out in fair copy, and we, looking upon the surface only, say, How well done! Who can tell what that “fair copy” cost? We see the picture hung upon the wall for exhibition, but we do not see how much canvas was thrown away, or how many outlines were discarded, or how many efforts were pronounced unworthy. We only see the last or best. So,

much is to be done in private with regard to learning to do well. We do not live our whole life in public. We make an effort in solitude: it is a failure; we throw it away; we acknowledge its existence to no one: still, we are acquiring skill—practice makes perfect—and when we do our first act of virtue in the public sight people may suppose that we are all but prodigies and miracles, so well was the deed done. Only God's eye saw the process which led up to it. This is a characteristic of divine grace, that it sets down every attempt as a success, it marks every failure honestly done as a victory already crowned. So we are losing nothing even on the road. The very learning is itself an education; the very attempt to do, though we fail of doing, itself gives strength, and encouragement, and confidence. In learning to do well we assist the negative work of ceasing to do evil. ¹

Herein is a mystery of spiritual education. In learning to pray we by so much separate ourselves from doing that which is evil in speech: we cleanse the mouth; we set the mind upon a new level; we import into the whole music of life a new keynote. How hard it must be to rise from prayer and then give both hands to the devil! Surely that is a miracle which ought to lie beyond the compass of human power. So we are not to wait until the negative process is completed before we begin the positive process. First of all we have to do a great negative work; we have to get rid of all our provincialisms before we can speak the true language of the country: we have to rid ourselves of our mistakes before we can begin to build: we have to cleanse the constitution before we commence the construction which is associated with sound health. Yet at points the two processes coincide, and they help one another. To cease to do evil without learning to do well is to cleanse the house and leave it empty that the devil may return to an ampler and more inviting habitation.

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord" (ver. 18).

"Come now, and let us reason together," may be read, I present an ultimatum.* "Let us reason together," or, I have

* For another treatment of this verse see *post*, p. 215.

come from the eternal place to offer man an ultimatum : How truly becoming to divine majesty is such a voice ! It is for God to say which is the way of life, and it is for God to say how life can be obtained by those who have forfeited it. Thus we get rid of all human inventions, all man-made schemes of salvation, all theories of human reconciliation. It is not for man to speak upon that question at all ; his opinion is not invited ; he can have no opinion to give that would touch the fundamental and vital condition of affairs. The picture, then, is that of the Eternal King offering an ultimatum to rebellious and perverse subjects.

“Saith the Lord.” This expression occurs frequently in Scripture ; it occurs repeatedly in this chapter. What meaning do we associate with the expression ? Who, in reading such words, would not read them in a loud and resounding voice ? It would appear as if we required the trumpet of the thunder that we might properly articulate the expression, “Thus saith the Lord.” Etymologically that is wholly wrong in some of the instances which occur in the prophecies of Isaiah. Were the words literally rendered they would come to this, *Thus doth the Lord whisper*. There is no thunder in the emphasis ; there is a solemn stillness, an accommodation of infinite voices to human capacity to listen. The appeal loses nothing wherever this etymology can be adopted, but rather seems to gain something.

“Thus doth the Lord whisper.” He has been a whispering Lord ; he was not in the earthquake, nor in the high wind, nor in the burning fire ; he was in the still small voice. The emphasis is in himself. For God to speak is to be emphatic by virtue of the very fact that it is he who speaks. The Lord has no occasion to raise his voice ; when he whispers he thunders,—not in the outward and popular sense of that term, but when the Eternal speaks there is an energy in his whispering that could not be found in all the thunders that roar in the troubled sky. Men often say, Could we but hear the Lord speak ! In ancient times men were enabled to say, “Thus saith the Lord,” and therefore they had an advantage over us. Nothing of the kind. The men of ancient time heard a whisper. So may we if we listen for it—if we say, Speak, Lord, for thy servant

heareth. What we need is the hearing ear. Is there a man who can solemnly declare that he has never heard a whispering in his conscience, in his better nature? Has no voice appealed to him, saying, Cease to do evil; learn to do well: be a braver man and a better; come away from all evil, and abandon the paths of unrighteousness which end in ruin? He may call it memory, or conscience, or describe it by any name that suits the fancy of the hour, but the right interpretation of that whispering, pleading, is that God has a controversy with that man, or is at that solemn juncture inviting him to paths of pleasantness and paths of peace.

Hear the still small voice; listen to the energetic whisper: it suits our weakness; it meets the necessity of the case in every aspect; it is adapted to the passion which reduces our speech to a cry, and it falls like balm upon wounds that ache, and through whose red lips our poor life pours itself in despair. What do we want from heaven? Great appeals that thrill the whole wind that blows around the globe? Do we want appearances in the constellations, figures in the zenith, convulsions, earthquakes, and signs in the clouds? By so much as we ask for these are we out of harmony with God's method of educating and preserving and directing the universe. Listen for quiet voices or whispered appeals, and know that the appeal loses nothing in consequence of its being whispered, but rather gains because he who whispers is God.

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (ver. 18).

Who could make this bold proposition? All men can dye their souls, but, as saith a quaint divine, only God can bleach them. It is in our power to dye ourselves into all colours, but only God can make us white. The light is the image of the purity to which we are called, and which God will work in us if we yield ourselves to his gracious ministry. The idea is that there is no human condition too desperate for divine treatment. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool": "red" represents blood, and blood represents fire, and blood and fire

are life; they hold in their tremendous grasp the secret of this awful thing that lives and breathes, and would be God if it could. The heifer, the white ashes of which were to purify those who had been in contact with the dead, was to be a red heifer; the sprinkling-brush was to be tied or fastened with a scarlet thread. There is a philosophy of colours; there is a theology of hues; and it hath pleased God to represent purity by whiteness. The saints above are robed in white; they who love God are clothed in white raiment now, and it is the harlot of the earth that is scarleted and that lives in her significant redness. Only God can take out all our black stains, and red signs, and scarlet tokens of iniquity, and make us as white as snow, brighter than the noonday sun. He has said he will do it; he offered to do it. This is the very purpose of the incarnation and ministry of Jesus Christ. The whole priesthood of the Son of God expresses itself in this holy eventuation, that every stain is taken out, and that the whole catharism has ended in spiritual purity and whiteness.

Are we trying to whiten ourselves? Then we must most surely fail. Have we undertaken to rub out the red spot from the hand that has committed murder? All the seas of the universe could not wash that hand and make it clean. God proposes to accomplish the miracle; let us hasten to him, and say, Lord, thy will be done; so long as there is one stain upon us we are restless, we are filled with torment: take thou out of us the last taint, and make us without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, a glorious Church, fit for heaven's own whiteness. If God called us to some trifling task, some little contracted effort, some evanescent attempt, to do a little better than we have been doing, the whole vocation of heaven would contradict itself; this, indeed, would be the subjugation, yea, the humiliation, of heaven's majesty in making so unworthy a proposition. The proposition is that we be cleansed in and out, that we have every fleck and flaw and speck and stain taken out by divinely-directed detergent methods, and that we be left at last pure with God's holiness. All this should be recognised as the claim of the Bible. It means to do this, it wants to do this; if it is speaking because of some human inspiration, who was the man who spoke so? Verily,

we would hear him speak again, for never did human invention propound so infinite a miracle.

We have spoken of an ultimatum ; the terms are given :—

“If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land : but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword : for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (vers. 19, 20).

This is a message which the common-sense of men can understand. It is not marred by even apparent superstition ; it is an ultimatum, based on reason which we ourselves can test ; it might have been stated by man within the limits which are possible to his understanding—“If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land : but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword.” That is happening every day. Here the Lord comes down upon the common reason and the common experience of mankind, and justifies supernatural revelations by his supreme and gracious hold on absolute facts which we ourselves can test. He works with both hands : one ranges through the heavens, and we cannot follow it ; the other sets before us the facts of human history, and thus by a double action God holds human attention and human confidence with gracious and benevolent mastery.

How the chapter varies in its tone :—

“How is the faithful city become an harlot ! it was full of judgment ; righteousness lodged in it ; but now murderers. Thy silver is become dross, thy wine [mutilated, as well as] mixed with water : thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves : every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards : they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. Therefore saith the Lord [whispereth the Lord,] the Lord of hosts, the mighty One of Israel, Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies” (vers. 21-24).

In no other verse are so many divine designations given. “Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies.” This is a very significant figure. It is the figure of a man drawing a deep breath, and thus casting off his trouble by an exhalation : Ah, I will draw a deep breath, and in my sighing I will ease me of mine adversaries—sigh them off, cast them away with the wind of my heart—and avenge me of mine

enemies. Lord, take not that deep inspiration against thy creatures ! Who can live if thou dost breathe upon us so ? who can answer the respiration of God ? Hold thy breath, or breathe softly and gently upon us, that we may live, and not die.

Isaiah represents by the threefold designation of the divine being the omnipotence of God. "The Lord,"—that would be enough ; "The Lord of hosts,"—that is more ; "The mighty One of Israel,"—he piles his argument, he draws in all possible designations significant of almightiness, and then asks Judah and Jerusalem if they will attempt to rebel against the concentrated omnipotence of God ; as who should say, O fools ! to attempt with knuckles and fists and hands of flesh to beat back an eternal rock ! Consider the lunacy of the case, the absolute madness of the conditions ! It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks : acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace. No man can encounter God in battle and leave the field a victor. Here again comes the great gospel ultimatum : Here is a stone : if you fall upon it, you will be broken that you may be reconstructed ; if it fall upon you, it will grind you to powder, and the wind will blow you away.

NOTE.

Of the literary qualities of Isaiah Ewald writes : "We cannot in the case of Isaiah, as in that of other prophets, specify any particular peculiarity, or any favourite colour as attaching to his general style. He is not the especially lyrical prophet, or the especially elegiacal prophet, or the especially oratorical and hortatory prophet, as we should describe a Joel, a Hosea, a Micah, with whom there is a greater prevalence of some particular colour ; but, just as the subject requires, he has readily at command every several kind of style and every several change of delineation ; and it is precisely this that, in point of language, establishes his greatness, as well as in general forms one of his most towering points of excellence. His only fundamental peculiarity is the lofty, majestic calmness of his style, proceeding out of the perfect command which he feels he possesses over his subject-matter. This calmness, however, no way demands that the strain shall not, when occasion requires, be more vehemently excited and assail the hearer with mightier blows ; but even the extremest excitement, which does here and there intervene, is in the main bridled still by the same spirit of calmness, and, not overstepping the limits which that spirit assigns, it soon with lofty self-control returns back to its wonted tone of equability (ii. 10-iii. 1 ; xxviii. 11-23 ; xxix. 9-14)."

Chapter i. 18.

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord."

GOD REASONING WITH MAN.

LOOK at the text as marking decided progress in the moral position of mankind. There was a time when such words were not used by the Almighty. We turn over the foregoing pages of the volume and find the Maker and creature standing in this relation : God drove out the man from Eden, and set a flaming sword in the garden where man had wont to be. It appears as if God himself had turned away, turned his back upon his child, and left the sinner to wander in outer darkness, to feel the bitterness and pain of his rebellion. There is no proposition at that time to reason out the case. There is a voice of thundering and of judgment, and afterwards there is a silence more terrible than the roar of the thunder and the howl of the tempest ! It is as if God had retired into the depths of infinite space, shut himself up in the chambers of his own eternity, and refused to have any further communication with the creature who had disobeyed his will. And yet, though it may seem to be so, there was, under all the apparent withdrawment and terribleness of judgment and indignation, the spirit of mercy and the spirit of hope towards man. For the gospel is not a new invention. It does not come up at any particular time and say, "I am the expression of God's mind to-day ; I am a new thing on the earth ; I make a new appeal to the understanding and the heart of man." The gospel is as old as God ; ancient as eternity ; and as for the Cross of Christ, it was built before the foundations of the rocks were laid ! Yet there was a time when God seemed to be filled with anger, holy and just, in relation to his child, who had rebelled against him. But now, reading this beautiful text, it seems as if a new order of things had been set in motion ; as if God—having,

as it were, recovered from the shock which his child's sin gave him—had come out of his hiding-place, willing to give the rebel a chance to speak for himself ; to state his own case, with all the energy of his wit, and with all the force of his eloquence.

What do these words teach ? What is their spirit, and what is their purpose, and what do they mean in relation to ourselves ? There is no necessity to divide men into two classes, the good and the bad,—we are all bad ! There are degrees, as between ourselves. Some are good, some are better, some are evil altogether, as these terms go in human speech, and as they are used merely for the sake of convenience. But in the sight of God, in the presence of his infinite holiness, and in relation to the law of God, there is none righteous, no not one. And as for the chief of saints, he will be loudest in declaring that he is also chief of sinners. What answer are we prepared to make to this gracious offer ? “Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord.” The proposition comes from God. It does not arise from the human side at all. It is a piece of pure condescension on the part of the Almighty himself. Grace comes out of the sovereignty of God. The possibility of salvation comes from God's grace. It is not in any wise of our conception or of our own doing. We are saved by faith, and that not of ourselves, for faith is the gift of God. God having made this proposition, proceeds upon the assumption that he knows himself to be right in this case. It is precisely so in our own affairs, in the common controversies of the day. The man who knows himself to be in the right, who feels himself to have a just cause in hand, is always the first to make the noblest propositions, and to offer as many concessions as are possible without impairing the law of absolute right, truth, and propriety. We know this to be a custom amongst ourselves. The great man is always the first to make propositions of conciliation. The great and noble nature is always the first to say, “Come, let us——” It is, generally speaking, the man who has injured us that holds his spite so long ; the man who has done wrong, that seeks to do still further injury, in order, in some way, to justify himself to himself as also to society. But the man who is justly offended is the first to say, “I bear no malice ; I seek for no unworthy retribution ; I shall find no satisfaction in seeing you humbled and

disgraced. Come now, let us discuss the matter in all its bearings, set it in its various lights, and see what it really means ; and if it be possible to restore harmony, let harmony be restored." If we do so, it is in an infinitely higher degree true in the case of Almighty God. He makes the proposition to his rebel. After man has committed high treason against his throne and court, after he has done his best to snap the divine sceptre, and insult the divine honour, after he has made himself a disgrace in creation, God says to him, not, "I will cut thee in twain with my glittering sword ; I will put my foot upon thee and crush thee into the dust, and defy thee to get thy life again ;" but he says, "Come now, let us reason together." This proposition is not only the proof of the grace of God ; but that grace itself is the vindication of his righteousness. He knows he is right, and he knows ~~he~~ he is right in the court of reason ; that if the case be honestly and fully stated the criminal will convict himself, he will burn with shame, and cry out for the judgment that is just. God is right, and we are wrong in this controversy. We are not wrong partially, not wrong here and there, with little spots of light and blue between the errors, but we are wrong altogether, —foully, shamefully, infamously wrong ! And unless every man shall see that and feel it, as a poisoning sting in his nature, he will never come in a right state of mind to consider the propositions of the Cross or the offers of divine grace.

Knowing this, God asks us to reason the case with him. He proceeds upon the assumption that man ought to be prepared to vindicate his conduct by reasons,—that a man's conduct ought not to be haphazard, but ought to have under it a basis of reasoning, of moral unity, and of understanding of the right relations of affairs. A man ought to be able to say why he does this, and why he refrains from doing that. He ought not to be living from hand to mouth, just doing what happens to come up first, without knowing why he does it. He ought to be able to say, "I will not drink of that cistern ;" he ought also to be able to give his reasons for avoiding it. He ought to be able at the end of every day to vindicate to himself, to his own understanding and self-respect, the course he has proceeded upon in business or otherwise during the whole day. Is this not right ? God says, "Why

do you do this? Let me know your reasons for having done so. Will you state your case to me? I give you the opportunity of stating your own case in your own terms." Observe how wonderfully influential, when rightly accepted, is a proposition of this kind. If men would think more they would sin less. "Oh that men were wise, that they would consider!" If a man, before doing questionable actions, would carefully and thoughtfully sit down and examine his reasons for giving up his strength to certain policies, he would in many cases be enabled, on the ground of mere common, human, right reasoning, to avoid offences which stain and disgrace his daily life. Alas! some of us dare not think. We shut our eyes; we take the plunge, and we risk the consequences. God says to us in his gentle mercy, "Do not do so; before you leap—look; before you put out your hand to touch the object of your ambition, consider what it is, what the taking of it involves; be careful, steady-minded, sober, thoughtful, knowing that he who uses his understanding aright will save himself from many a fall and many a pain." Have you ever tried this? Have you ever attempted to write out a vindication of any one sin you have ever committed? Take a white card, write at the top of it the sin you propose to commit, whatever it be; shut yourself up in solitude; write in some characters that nobody but yourself can decipher, and put down under your sin the reasons why you propose to commit it; and put down every possible excuse you can. Try to reason yourself into it, and you will fail to do so if you be just to the first principles of human understanding and to the first elements of common sense. And God asks you to do this; to reason the case out. He will not allow us to live our life in a passion, in a thoughtless hurry, to do things in confusion and haste. He imposes upon us this simple obligation: "Stand still; think about it; reason it out; see what you mean; and do not do it until you know the whole scope and consequences of the act." He proposes more than this. He comes to the man who has actually taken the plunge, who has really done the evil deed, who has absolutely committed himself to the devil, who wears the livery of the pit; and uses the language of perdition, and he says, "Come now, let us talk this matter over; let us reason together. Make this a special hour in your history; say what you will; be honest

to your own judgment and to your own heart; put down your case; state your reasons and your excuses, and let us go into this case thoroughly." No man can vindicate wrong by reason. Every man who has a bad case to defend must in the first place blink his own common-sense, insult his own sagacity, and quash his own sense of right, before he can defend himself, or defend the evil action of another. That is something to know. That is a bold proposition to make, even in the court of reason—not in the court of religion, distinctively so called. No man can make out a good case for wrong. He must evade many lines of obligation; he must trifle with the plain and spiritual sense of many terms; he must hurry over many very difficult parts of his case; he must depose his conscience; he must hoodwink his sagacity; and then, perhaps, he may do something confusedly and wickedly in the defence of some questionable action of his life. Young men especially should consider this very soberly and carefully: It is impossible to defend any bad action by good reason. You may be witty, sharp; your power of repartee may be unquestionable, but you cannot successfully defend a bad action by good reasoning. Logic is against you as well as theology. Common-sense is against you as well as spiritual revelation. This is the strength and the majesty of the Christian faith, that it challenges men by the first principles of reasoning to defend themselves, as sinners, before the Almighty. "Oh that men were wise, that they would consider!" "My people do not know; Israel doth not consider." If men would take a few quiet hours, now and then, and look at life as it really is, and at themselves as they really are—the hour of thought might become the hour of prayer.

Who is it in the text that invites men to reason with him? It is God! Then the sinner is invited to take his case to the fountain-head. Do not many persons stumble and err at this very point by a misunderstanding of the terms of this proposition? If we take our evil hearts to a human teacher, he can do but little for us except as an instrument. We may hear his ministry, but we must regard him as the echo and not the voice, the second and not the principal, the medium and not the revealer. If we take our case to a priest, named by the highest names,

still we have done what we ought not to have done if we make that the final point instead of a temporary resting-place. It is God who invites us to state the case directly to himself. Have we ever employed one hour of life in stating our case in secret to God? Oh the crimson faces we have had!—oh the tottering knees!—oh the pain of self-conviction and self-torture! Go directly and immediately to God, and talk to him; speak to the invisible. It does a man good to be apparently speaking to nothing,—speaking into the air, as it were, but with the holy consciousness that God is there, catching every tone and every sigh, every aspiration and every desire. Let us try that experiment of stating our case to the invisible Father,—the present but unseen God. We can only do so in solitude. It is well for a man to have a place of private resort for the consideration of all the bearings of his life. Some of us have had such places ever since we can remember. We have occasion to go back to them, in recollection, with joy and thanksgiving. Places in far-away quiet fields, where we used to go between school hours and bend our knees behind some blossoming hawthorn hedge, or some old, old tree, and there, even in our teens, talk to God till the tears started, and life seemed to be going out of us in one great painful shudder. But oh the sweetness of those hours! We came back even to play, and work, and suffering with new life and new hope. God says, “I will condescend to talk the case over with you; I will hear what you have to say; I will understand your case, and listen to your reason.” Go to the fountain-head; take what you can of the advantages of an intermediate ministry; listen to godly men of every denomination and every type of intellect and method of speech, and be thankful if any one can utter a tone that touches your heart, or give one gleam of light that penetrates the darkness of your understanding. But do not forget the fountain-head! Talk an hour with the servant; but spend your lifetime with the master. Have a passing interview with his agents; but when he throws open his door and says, “Come now; I am ready; I wait to be gracious,” go to his feet and talk the case out.

From a proposition of this kind what can we infer but that God's purpose is, in making it, to mingle mercy with judgment?

The tone is distinctly that of a merciful and gracious proposition. Such words could not be used without an intention, on the part of the speaker, to do everything in his power to meet the case of the criminal. Hear the language and say whether, grammatically and fairly interpreted, it does not imply that God is prepared to make every concession in his power to the sinner. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord." This is a stopping-place on the road to judgment. We are told that God will come to his judgment throne and sit upon it, and gather all nations around his feet. But before ascending that solemn elevation he sits down on the throne of reasoning, of conference with his creatures, and says, "I must talk with thee; I must give thee an opportunity of hearing thyself upon this question, because I know that it is impossible for any man to talk out his reasons for doing wrong without, in the very act, convicting himself; and such conviction may lead to penitence and contrition, to shame, to broken-heartedness. I therefore propose to all the rebels in my human kingdom to come to me and to reason their case in my hearing." What does he intend? Does he wish to take advantage of our slips of the tongue? Is he listening to us as a keen and unsparing critic, who will rebuke us if we make one slip in grammar, or one misstatement of the case? Is he not rather there partly as our advocate? If it be possible to speak a word in our favour, which we ourselves have forgotten, will he not supply it as we proceed with our speech? He will. Judgment is his strange work, and mercy is his peculiar delight. He, therefore, asks us to state our case, and his own purpose is to mingle judgment with mercy, and to meet us at the extremest possible points of his own law and righteousness.

If God could trifle with righteousness in making a case up with us his own throne would be insecure, his own heaven would not be worth having. In taking care of righteousness he is taking care of us. In judging everything upon a basis of absolute infinite righteousness he is taking care of everything that is good in us—in the universe; he is protecting himself as God, and setting a flaming sword around his own throne! Herein do men greatly err. Talking upon religious questions, they say, "Why does not God come down and forgive us all?" That is precisely

what he wishes to do. Only even God cannot forgive until we ourselves desire to be forgiven. When we come to him saying, "Lord, have mercy," we shall hardly utter our prayer before his great heaven will become one glorious exhibition of mercy, and come down into our hearts and lives with its light and its beauty! We make a fundamental mistake if we suppose that God has only to say, "I forgive you all," and thus restore the universe to harmony and order. God cannot say so. If he were to say so, he would be trifling with righteousness, he would be rendering insecure the pillars of his own throne, and the reins of his own government would fall out of his hands. He must be just; he must be righteous. Righteousness must be vindicated, and then grace becomes sure. Righteousness must be satisfied, and then eternity becomes heaven! The law must be made honourable, then the gospel will be given to us, with the assurance of eternal permanence,—but not without.

It is impossible for the Almighty himself to forgive men unless men come to him with contrition, with repentance towards himself, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no action so difficult as the action of forgiveness. There is no action so complicated as the action of pardon. It seems a very simple thing to say, "I forgive you; say no more about it; there is an end of the whole affair!" He who could speak so is immoral. He who could talk so is not to be trusted. If a man could treat the moral relationships of life in that way it would but prove that his conscience had been drugged, that his judgment had been hoodwinked, and that there was nothing morally permanent in the quality of his soul but its corruptness. If we could get men to understand that thoroughly we should have begun a great work in their souls. We have heard people say, again and again, that God will be merciful; at the very last he will say, "Ah well, you have lived a bad life, I know, but I forgive you—you may go into heaven." There is nothing so false in reasoning, so absurd in logic, so corrupt in morals, as vapid sentimental talk of that kind! What, then, does God propose to do? He proposes this: "Do you feel the sinfulness of sin?" Yes. "Do you renounce all hope of saving yourself?" Yes. "Do you know what sin is as sin? Not merely as a social offence,

not merely as a national or social crime, but sin as sin ; and do you hate it as such ?" I do. Then God says, Take all the grace you need ; the Cross is the answer to the pain of your conviction, and the atonement made by my Son is the way, and the only way, and the infinitely sufficient way, to pardon, to purity, and to peace ! That is a result secured by the consent of both parties. I may have offended you. You may come to me and say, " You have deeply grieved me ; but I forgive." I can say, " Take your forgiveness away ; I do not want to be forgiven by you ! " Observe, therefore, that you have not the power to forgive me. You can forgive the crime, but you cannot forgive the sin. And even your forgiveness of the crime I may resent, and turn into an occasion of inflicting still deeper injury upon you. But if I come to you and say, " I have injured you ; I see that I must have given you great pain ; I did you wrong, and in my heart I am sorry for having done so,"—if then you say, " With my heart I forgive you," the transaction is based on solid moral principles, and the result is likely to be permanent and beneficent. It is so with God. God cannot pass an act of universal amnesty ; he cannot open all the prison doors of the universe and say to the criminals, " Come forth, I forgive you all." But if they in their condemned cells would but heave one sigh of penitence, and utter one cry for God's forgiving mercy, every bolt would fall off, every lock fly back, and there would be no prison in all the universe of God ! Are you willing to be pardoned ? Have you come from a sense of sin to know its bitterness, and to feel the want of something more ? To you is this gospel preached, " Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

Thus the sinner is left absolutely without excuse. Looking at the whole volume of inspired revelation ; looking at the person and ministry of God the Son ; looking at his sacrifice upon Calvary ; and at the whole scope and bearing of his mediation ; having regard to the gracious proposition made by the Father of lights to the children of darkness, that they would come to him and reason their case, we declare that, If any man be lost it is because he will not be saved ! " Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life." We cannot escape that conclusion ; and in one aspect it is a glorious conclusion, because it gives us

assurance that nothing is lost that would be saved—that God's great arms have been stretched out to the very brink of hell, that he might save the man who was just slipping over; and that man said "No!" And when he went down, he went down because he persisted in moral suicide; and a verdict of suicide must be returned by all the angels of light, and all the spirits of just men made perfect! There is no other verdict. Shall that be pronounced upon us? Some may say, "I have excuses." No! Unless you mean by excuses that you can trifle, that you can state a case that has no moral substance in it. If you say that you can gloss over your actions, put a little gilding upon the outside of your behaviour, so as to make it look tolerably well, we agree with you. But if you say that you can reason out your case, if you have done one bad action in your life, you are stating what you know to be untrue. Can you defend a bad action? What a wicked genius must be yours! If you have ever pressed your finger too heavily upon man, woman, or child who was weak and self-helpless, all your genius and sagacity would be used in vain if you attempted to defend the action on moral principles: your attempted vindication would only double your sin.

Will you reason with God? He invites you to do so. Do you address an invitation to the Almighty to reason with you? You need not address an invitation to him, because his invitation has been issued from the beginning, and is still operative. He—the divine One—the grieved Father, issues the invitation. How shall we accept it? Simply, heartily, lovingly, thankfully. One hour's reasoning with God may mean a life-time in eternity of purity and joy. Let us reason out all cases with God, and never do anything that even looks doubtful without having a spiritual loving conference with the Eternal One. It is thus that character will be made solid; every day be touched with infinite beauty, and life become a hope and an assurance of immortality! Why not surrender at once? Why not say, "I will lay down my arms here, never to take them up against the divine government again so long as I live"? Why not say, "We love him because he first loved us! We find in Jesus Christ the answer to our original sin and to our actual transgres-

sion ; our only hope of new life is in the ministry of God the Holy Ghost " ? If this could be said by one, there would be joy in the presence of the angels of God. If it could be said by a multitude, then heaven itself would be filled with the music of a new joy, and become still more heaven by reason of its ecstatic rapture. I wish to rouse your minds, and compel you to consider your lives, and to press men by God's great, great grace to surrender themselves to the Lamb of God, the only Saviour of the world.

NOTE.

"What is the tenor of his [Isaiah's] message in the time of Uzziah and Jotham ? This we read in chapters i.-v. Chapter i. is very general in its contents. In perusing it we may fancy that we hear the very voice of the Seer as he stands (perhaps) in the Court of the Israelites denouncing to nobles and people, then assembling for divine worship, the whole estimate of their character formed by Jehovah, and his approaching chastisements. 'They are a sinful nation ; they have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger. Flourishing as their worldly condition now appears, the man whose eyes are opened sees another scene before him (1-9),—the land laid waste, and Zion left as a cottage in a vineyard,—(a picture realised in the Syro-Ephraimitish war, and more especially in the Assyrian invasion—the great event round which the whole of the first part of the book revolves). Men of Sodom and Gomorrah that they are, let them hearken ! they may go on if they will with their ritual worship, "trampling" Jehovah's courts ; nevertheless, he loathes them : the stain of innocent blood is on their hands ; the weak are oppressed ; there is bribery and corruption in the administration of justice. Let them reform ; if they will not, Jehovah will burn out their sins in the smelting fire of his judgment. Zion shall be purified, and thus saved, whilst the sinners and recreants from Jehovah in her shall perish in their much-loved idolatries.' This discourse suitably heads the book ; it sounds the keynote of the whole ; fires of judgment destroying, but purifying a remnant,—such was the burden all along of Isaiah's prophesyings.

"Of the other public utterances belonging to this period, chapters ii.-iv. are by almost all critics considered to be one prophesying,—the leading thought of which is that the present prosperity of Judah should be destroyed for her sins, *to make room for the real glory of piety and virtue* ; while chapter v. forms a distinct discourse, whose main purport is that Israel, God's vineyard, shall be brought to desolation. The idolatry denounced in these chapters is to be taken as that of private individuals, for both Uzziah and Jotham served Jehovah. They are prefaced by the vision of the exaltation of the mountain on which Jehovah dwells above all other mountains, to become the source of light and moral transformation to all mankind (ii. 2-4)."—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

Chapter ii. 1-5.

"The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord."

PERSONAL PROPHECIES.

THIS chapter opens with a very energetic and graphic expression, namely, "The word that Isaiah . . . saw." There are two most noticeable facts: the first is the testimony of a man whose name is given; and, secondly, here is an indication of the sense—namely, sight—by which the revelation was perceived. We have a living witness and an eye-witness. These are not anonymous prophecies; they are not papers that were found in the morning before the dew had gone up which had been shed from dark heavens in the night-time: the prophecies are associated with men, special men—men whose names are given, and they have about them at least all the outward seeming of authentic testimony. Is it possible to see a "word"? Yes, in the highest exaltation of the mind. But what is possible to the highest reverie of the soul is impossible to cold thought. On this account a good deal of controversy has arisen as to prophecies and prophets, and the meaning of exalted sentiments and arguments. The difference between the prophet and the controversialist accounts for it all: the prophet was in the highest mental or spiritual excitement, his soul was ecstatic; he realised his highest and grandest self, and in an hour of

transanimation he saw, he heard, he beheld the farther distances, and distinctly overheard the farther music. The controversialist comes upon the level ground, well fed, cold in temperament, cynically critical, and looks at everything through earthly mediums, or at best through literary mediums, and he pronounces the prophet wrong, whereas it was his own spiritual temperature that was below the occasion: he was not in the atmosphere in which souls live that use divine words.

The revelation was personal, and no religion is worth any consideration that does not identify itself with actual personal experience. Produce the Isaiah that "saw" the word, and let us see him. That is what Christianity does every day—it produces the Christian. Who says that this world shall be saved? *This* man says so: we give you his name, his address, his antecedents, his character; he is a man who has a reputation to lose, and he says that having been saved himself he has come to see that by the necessity of that action all men must be brought sooner or later under the same renewing, transfiguring, and sanctifying influence. A famous argument was set up long ago to the effect that a revelation could only come to one man, and therefore that what we call revelation is only an account of a revelation that came to somebody else. The argument took a fast hold upon the attention of the men who first heard it. But it is no argument at all. Everything depends upon the nature of the revelation. Very possibly there may be some sights which come once for all, and then vanish into darkness or invisibleness: about such sights it may be well to say, Only one man saw them, and all we can say is that we have heard that he did see them. But when the revelation is by its very necessity universal; when it only comes to one man because he represents humanity, then a different standard of judgment must be erected. The Bible does not only deal with local predictions and prophecies, about a mound of stones here, and a ditch that is to be dried up yonder: it handles worlds, ages, manhood; it deals with universals, and therefore in all its sublime prophecies it does not limit itself to one personal consciousness, but through that consciousness it addresses the whole world in all the ages of its progress and liberty. So Isaiah is a living man to-day for all the purposes of

this evidence, and the disciples are all living at this moment so far as the truth of Christianity is concerned. Every man sees his own aspect of the word, but it is the same word. All travellers in Switzerland see the same Matterhorn, yet there are as many Matterhorns as there are men who look upon that wondrous pinnacle of rock and snow. The thought is a unit, but the impressions it creates are a million multiplied by itself in number. So with the prophecies of the Bible and the prophecies of daily-expanding history. Every man must see them for himself, and be faithful to that which came within the limit of his own vision : by the multiplication of his personal testimony we shall soon have a universal declaration as to the presence and action of God in human history. Every man must see the word for himself. If there are men who are living upon the account which somebody else has given of a revelation they are not living at all ; we do not number them among the witnesses upon the Christian side of the case ; they are driven about by every wind of doctrine ; they are unstable souls. But you cannot trifle with eye-witnesses ; you may confuse them as to dates, and fret them as to the arrangement of details, and work upon the infirmities of their memory or their imagination ; but the thing they saw comes up through it all, and stands there immovable and distinct. Only those who can speak thus of Christian prophecy and Christian discipline are to be admitted as witnesses in the elucidation and proof of the Christian cause.

Let us see what the meaning of this elevation was in the experience of Isaiah. We have it called high, ecstatic, and described it as of the nature of reverie ; now let us test it at certain practical points. Let the witness proceed :—

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills ; and all nations shall flow unto it ” (ver. 2).

Though ecstatic, Isaiah is still rational ; though animated as with a thousand lives, he still lays hold of great philosophies as within the sweep of a noble benevolence. Let us see what has to happen. “The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains.” Consider what that

prediction meant in Isaiah's time. He lived within well-defined boundaries and limitations : the Jew was not a great man in the sense of including within his personal aspirations all classes, conditions, and estates of men ; left to himself he could allow the Gentiles to die by thousands daily without shedding a tear upon their fallen bodies ; he lived amongst his own people ; it was enough for him that the Jews were happy, for the Gentiles were but dogs. Here is a new view of human nature, a great enlargement of spiritual boundaries. Whenever you find this universal element coming into a man's thought and language he is under the noblest influences ; he is escaping tradition ; he is getting away from narrowness, and prejudice, and littleness : he has identified himself with the broadest fortunes of the common world. By so much, therefore, is this high animation of Isaiah proved to be but a noble aspect of reason itself : it is reason on fire, reason transfigured, reason divinely possessed, and radiant at every point.

How does the witness proceed ? We find that the worship, according to the third verse, is to be associated with teaching. "He will teach us of his ways." So the elevation of mind does not transcend the limits of education. Man does not invent his religion or his morality ; he is taught of God. But being the subject of teaching he is of necessity the subject of continual change and advancement. Then, first, he should be most humble, for he yet is conscious of ignorance in many directions ; then, secondly, he should be most reverent, for he cannot teach himself, but is to be taught by the ministry of the Holy One. We are all at school. Woe betide us when we think our education perfect ! "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Observe, "in the knowledge" of him : there is more to be known about him, more to be comprehended of his wisdom, and purpose, and grace. He has many things to say unto us, but we cannot bear them now. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." "Brethren," said Paul, "I count not myself to have apprehended"—to have closed my education—"but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the

high calling of God in Christ Jesus;" and even he, the most majestic intellect in the Church, looking upon the mysteries of the divine love, exclaimed with the pathos of a soul that had suffered agonies for Christ, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" Because we think our education completed we become proud controversialists; we suppose we know everything, and therefore, according to apostolic judgment, we know nothing. He is the wise man who is always going back to the beginning of his lesson, and who spends the first hour of his study in reviewing the acquisitions of yesterday. We are not to fly, we are to walk; we are not to see things in the gross, and in all the dimness of well-regulated perspective only; we are to see them also in detail, and to keep the least of the commandments, that we may gain capacity and disposition to obey also the larger law.

"And we will walk in his paths." So the worship is not only associated with teaching, but with morality. Christianity is not only transportation of mind, it is also obedience of heart; it is doing the daily duty with patient industry, with all the detail which love expends on work which it expects to be received and admired by the object of its affection. Let us hear nothing about religion dissociated from morality. The most frightful divorce that can take place in all human thought is a divorce between theology and morality. If we must give up one of them, let us give up the formal and scientific theology. To surrender good behaviour is to strike the altar at the base—is to smite the Cross with lightning. We are only strong as we are good; we only universalise the gospel as we make it beautiful, in temper, spirit, benevolence, sympathy, and love on our own part. The mountain of the Lord's house will never be established in the top of the mountains until it proves its claim to be so highly and securely elevated by the genuine honesty and goodness of every soul that belongs to the Church of Christ. This is the way to mission the world, this is the way to convert the heathen,—to disclose to them a beauty of character which must fascinate their attention, and excite their profoundest inquiry. We may propound our dogmas, and only enlarge the area of intellectual discussion; but if we live our lives and they be, at least in

purpose and zealous endeavour, faultless, useful, beneficent, men must eventually surrender their weapons in the presence of such a testimony.

Still the prophecy proceeds:—

“And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (ver. 4).*

How high Isaiah must have been even in imagination when he foresaw that possibility! It is easy for us now to take up these words and set them to chanting music, but what was it for the first speaker to deliver them? How he must have been rent in his very soul by an uncontrollable and maddening joy, when he caught sight of that dawn which brought with it the reign of peace, the sovereignty of love! Consider the age of these words: let those who find fault with the Bible attack the Bible at its strongest points. This is one of them, that a man thousands of years ago should have anticipated the song of the angels, should have seen the day of Christ afar off, and been glad with all the quietness and joy of a Christian sabbath. We look back, the prophets looked forward, and because the things they saw were in such startling contrast to the things they felt near them, surely their faith was tried: because what appeared to them was clothed with the nature of impossibility. This is the very song of the angels: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”: “Peace on earth, and good will toward men.” Here is a prediction of arbitration in case of war—“He . . . shall rebuke many people.” Read the word “rebuke”—He shall arbitrate amongst many people: he shall hear their cause; he shall redress their grievances; he shall determine their controversies, and men shall accept his award as final. And here is peace as the final goal. See the forge lighted; see the smith blowing his bellows; see him putting into his fire the sword and making it into a plowshare, and thrusting in the spear and beating it into a pruninghook. That is Christianity! Every sword that is sheathed to be taken out no more is a Christian argument completed. Every bad institution torn down and levelled with the dust is a proof that Christ was

* See note, *post*, p. 234.

the Son of God. Every child taken off the street, and put into a public school, and educated at the public expense as a member of the commonwealth and an element in the social confederacy, is an answer to the Lord's prayer. But whilst Christendom makes swords and spears, Christendom is theoretically Christian but practically atheistic. What a projection of mind was here on the part of Isaiah : in his day the sword was the signal of power, the spear was greater than the sceptre, the warrior was the applauded man, and he who had most chariots was most divine. Isaiah was lifted up above all the paraphernalia of kingdoms and wars and military troubles, and he foresaw the time when peace should have her victories not less renowned than war.

We dwell upon these points to show that the man was not in a mere trance—that the high reverie or ecstasy in which we found his mind did not divest him of the highest reason, but gave to that reason the sight of faith, clothed that reason with the radiance and dignity of hope.

"O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord" (ver. 5).

That is the only preparation for further revelation. Walking in the light, we shall receive increase of illumination ; thankful for the morning dawn, we shall see the noontide splendour ; faithful in a little, we shall be entrusted with much ; honest children of the twilight, we shall yet see things in their largest and grandest reality. If we do the will, we shall know the doctrine. Blessed is that servant who shall be found waiting, watching, working when his Lord cometh, for his Lord shall entrust him with ampler riches.

Isaiah has been called the evangelical prophet : are there any traces of his title to this high designation within the compass of this text ? Let us see. He speaks in the second verse of all nations flowing unto the house of the Lord : where do we find the expression "all nations" in the Gospels ? We find it in the very lips of Christ—"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations." Christ's is a national religion ; it takes up empires, and provinces, and

continents, and worlds, and ages; it is the infinite faith. Isaiah, then, seemed to suggest the very words which the Son of God himself should one day cite.

“And many people shall go and say——” By the “many people” we are to understand an enlargement of the Jewish people: other people are to bear part, and to have lot and memorial in this great enthusiasm. Does Jesus Christ ever predict anything of the kind? It was Jesus Christ who said: “They shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.” What a view was his! he saw all men drawn unto him as he was lifted up on the Cross, and lifted up in Christian character.

“Neither shall they learn war any more.” Jesus Christ is the Prince of peace, the Enemy of war, the Ruler who controls by beneficence of soul and righteousness of statute and precept. With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Such a revelation as this implies and necessitates divine power. These things do not come about by mere wishing or willing on the part of men; these are the miracles of God. Is this end worthy of Christ? What is the end? That there shall be at last a sanctuary above the mountains, that all men shall come to it in a world-wide pilgrimage, and climb the green steepes of the mountains, that they may receive the hospitality of grace and wisdom in the guest-chamber that is above. Is it worthy of Christ that he should subdue the nations, take out of them their military temper, their thirst for human blood, and make men brothers the world over? Is this a miracle worthy of his majesty? This miracle, great as it is, cannot take place in the nation until it has taken place in the individual. Herein the work of Christ is specific, and is defined with critical limitation. We cannot have a Christian nation until we have Christian men. The family is not Christian until every member of the household is a child of God. The religion will be national when the religion is individual, not before. It is worth while, therefore, to win men one by one to this state. It is worthy of an angel to wrestle with one creature until it is said of him in heaven,

"Behold, he prayeth." We cannot convert nations at once, but we can attempt to win individual sinners; we can pray with individual penitents; we can do the humble work of the school, whether it be on the Sabbath-day or on the week-day; we can fight for one soul as if it involved the destinies of the universe. Only thus, one by one, can we work. When he whose right it is to reign shall come in his power, nations may be born in a day, empires may consentaneously turn round to him and say, Hail, Son of God! But that must be his action. Ours is the humble, modest, limited, detailed action of trying to convert sons, daughters, neighbours, friends; and when the Church resolutely sets herself to do this work her Lord will not be wanting either in presence or in benediction.

NOTE.

"The verses ii. 2-4, it should be premised, recur with slight variations in the fourth chapter of Micah, and are supposed by many to have been borrowed by both writers from some older source. The prophet appears before an assembly of the people, perhaps on a Sabbath, and recites this passage, depicting in beautiful and effective imagery the spiritual pre-eminence to be accorded in the future to the religion of Zion. He would dwell upon the subject further; but scarcely has he begun to speak when the disheartening spectacle meets his eye of a crowd of soothsayers, of gold and silver ornaments and finery, of horses and idols; his tone immediately changes, and he bursts into a diatribe against the foreign and idolatrous fashions, the devotion to wealth and glitter, which he sees about him, and which extorts from him in the end the terrible wish, *Therefore forgive them not* (vers. 5-9). And then in one of his stateliest periods Isaiah declares the judgment about to fall upon all that is 'tall and lofty,' upon Uzziah's towers and fortified walls, upon the great merchant ships at Elath, upon every object of human satisfaction and pride, when wealth and rank will be impotent to save, when idols will be cast despairingly aside, and when all classes alike will be glad to find a hiding-place, as in the old days of Midianite invasion or Philistine oppression (Judg. vi. 2; 1 Sam. xiii. 6), in the clefts and caves of the rocks."—REV. CANON DRIVER, D.D.

Chapter ii. 6-16.

DIVINE ACCUSATIONS.

"Therefore thou hast forsaken thy people the house of Jacob, because they be replenished from the east, and are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the children of strangers" (ver. 6).

THIS paragraph is charged with the old complaint against the nominal people of God. They could not live within their appointed boundaries; it seemed to be impossible for them to be content with the divinely-erected altar; they must needs enter into foreign alliances, and into relations with strangers whose religion was calculated to debase the intellect and to deprave the heart. This is the charge of the sixth verse: The people of God were replenished from the east, and had become soothsayers like the Philistines; they pleased themselves in the children of strangers. They were cloud-diviners; they were looking about for sights, omens, signs, wonders; they were trying to make revelations—as we should say, Bibles—for themselves, and their inventions brought upon them coldness of heart and forsakenness by the divine Father. This is no ancient lapse; we are not exhuming the history of the world whilst dwelling upon such apostasies: who is content with his own religion? Who is there into whose heart there does not come now and again a subtle suggestion that he can enlarge the revelation he has, that he can find out something for himself, that if he continues to peruse the clouds he may see there some omens which he may dignify with the name of divine appearances? We cannot be content with the book; we want to write a second volume, to add something, at least a footnote of our own, that we may see the work of our own inventiveness and ingenuity.

How difficult is discipline in every department of life! How hard it is to keep to the strict and well-defined line, and to

subdue the energy of invention, and to say to that curious and marvellous power within us which would do something on its own account to amend the ways of providence, and enlarge the scope of revelation, Sit down: speak not: withdraw from the front, and study lessons of humility. This apostasy takes various forms; but every age has its own form of apostasy, or withdrawal from God. The Philistines are dead, old sooth-saying is probably forgotten, the days of witchcraft and magic are cleared out of the immediate history of the time, but there may be a witchcraft of the higher sort, a magic of another quality and range altogether; after all it may be only the name we have got rid of,—the quality and the energy of the thing abandoned may still be amongst us, working in new ways and under new conditions all its mischief in the heart. It would seem as if men must knock at doors for themselves, and not be content with the wide-open gate which God has sent, through which men may evermore go straight up to himself without priestly medium or official intervention of any kind. Who has not thought that he might see a spirit or feel one? Who has not, even under some reluctance and protestation, put himself within conditions supposed to be favourable to manifestations,—the movement of an article of furniture, a shadow passing before the vision, a touch in the darkness,—who has not thought, even whilst repudiating the idea in its broader aspects, that he might somehow increase the revelation which God has given to man, and find some back-stair way into the sanctuary of the heavens, into the innermost place of the invisible, where the lightnings are, where the spiritual electricity resides, and where even God himself dwells as in a chosen tabernacle? We have various forms, therefore, of cloud-reading, and divination, and calculation, and geometrical figures, and drawing of lots; but the whole thing means that we want to break another door into the eternal, and find another passage into the invisible and infinite. God always has rebuked this inventiveness and this audacity. Nothing good has ever come of it. It has troubled the Church for a time; it has divided families; it has appeared to bring with it great benefits, but all such machinery, magic, divination has left the world without having conferred upon it any solid and valuable benefit: men have come back to the old book and the familiar story, and they

have found in the eternal fountain of the Bible all that was needful for the fertilisation of the soul, and the comfort of life under all the stress and storm of sorrow, darkness, and temptation's most furious assaults.

In the case before us we read : " Therefore thou hast forsaken thy people." The term is logical. God never forsakes his people in any whimsical way : he is not a man, or a son of man, that he should treat his creatures arbitrarily, moodily,—now full of sunshine in relation to them, and now covered with great clouds, without giving any reason for the change. It is a most noticeable feature in Biblical revelation that when God forsakes men he gives the reason for abandoning them. The reason is always moral. God never leaves man because he is little, or weak, or¹ self-distrustful, or friendless, or homeless, or broken-hearted ; when God forsakes man it is because man has first forsaken him, broken his laws, defied his sword, challenged his judgment, forsaken with ungrateful abandonment the altar at which the life has received its richest blessing. So, never let us neglect the word " therefore " in reading concerning divine judgments. God will never forsake the life that trusts him. If we are conscious of being divinely forsaken, let us hold severe inquest into moral actions or moral dispositions : sometimes the apostasy is inward, it is a spiritual declension, almost without a name, certainly without a shape,—a shaking of thought, a disturbing of confidence, a flaw all but invisible, except to God's eye, in the constancy of love : sometimes the apostasy is external ; it writes itself in unholy action ; it makes itself vivid even to terribleness in the down-going of our whole nature and our whole attitude towards man and towards God. But the point to be remembered is this—when we are forsaken it is because we have forsaken God. Is God to be the companion of idols ? Is the Lord to be invited into darkened rooms, that he may be one of the deities of the universe, and take his place in order of seniority or of nominal superiority ? Is he to be invited to compete with the fancies of the human brain for the sovereignty of human mind and the arbitrament of human destiny ? Herein he is a jealous God. " The Lord alone shall be exalted in that day." If we make gods we must be content with the manufactures

which we produce; but we never can persuade the eternal God to sit down with our wooden deities, and hold counsel with the inventions and fictions of a diseased imagination. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve." Again: "If Baal be God, serve him; if the Lord, serve him." If you are going to read the universe by the aid of Planchette, read it, and abide by the issue; but do not mix things that have no congeniality—separate one from another, and having chosen your idols stand up for them, and prove yourselves worthy of the dehumanising and debasing relation. "Ye cannot serve God and mammon,"—ye cannot read a Bible and pursue the clouds with any hope of finding in them an additional revelation; you cannot have the Cross of Christ and some wooden image of your own manufacture. When we are real in our religion we shall blessedly and helpfully assist the world.

Now we come upon another logical course:—

"Their land also is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of horses, neither is there any end of their chariots: their land also is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made" (vers. 7, 8).

Observe how the sequence runs: money in abundance: money will buy horses, and horses stand for power: horses will need chariots, and chariots mean dash, speed, ostentation—money, horses, chariots, can men end there? They cannot; and given money, horses, chariots, without a corresponding sanctification, without the inworking of that spirit of self-control which expresses the action of the Holy Ghost, and you compel men to go farther and to fill their land with idols. The sequence cannot be broken. Men may have money, horses, chariots, and the true God; but when men have money, horses, chariots, and no god that is true, they will make gods for themselves, for they must eke out their ostentation by some sort of nominal piety. Men will build churches; men must have religious rites and ceremonies; and what can suit the worldly man better than an idol that takes no notice of him, a wooden deity that never troubles him with its disciplinary obligations? What is worse for any land than unsanctified prosperity? Who can trust himself beyond a given point with the riches and honours of this world?

How they enkindle evil fires ! how they madden human ambition ! how they cause the man to become boastful, imperious, overbearing, and oppressive ! Who has not had some little experience of this ? Some men can carry more of the world's riches than others, and yet retain their modesty ; but wherever money, horses, chariots come, without corresponding moral discipline and chastening, there must be an issue in idolatry. Who can be quite content without some form of religion ? Strangely and inexplicably, some men's religion is unbelief. They protest so much against belief that they are obliged to make a kind of deity of their unbelief. They are proud of it, and yet they are conscious of the weakness of their position ; they fill up with hollow laughter that which is wanting in solidity and continuity of argument. Somewhere, somehow, in some form, every man will have a religion beyond himself, and that religion will either be faith, or unbelief ; God, or mammon ; the living Father, or the deaf and dumb idols of man's own making.

What then comes ? Universal apostasy in the land :—

“ And the mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself (ver. 9).

Apostasy is not partial, it is universal. That is the case with the world as God views it. When the world left him, according to the evangelical conception, it went altogether. God looked from heaven to see if there were any righteous, and he said, There is none righteous, no, not one : they are altogether corrupt : they have turned out of the way : there is none that doeth good, no, not one. A marvellous action is this of moral apostasy ! It drags down whole worlds with it ; it troubles every section of every province in God's empire ; it troubles the judgment, the conscience, the imagination, the will ; it makes every appetite an open mouth which devours things that are good, and destroys qualities that are holy. So it is with the individual character. You do not find a man recognised by the divine judgment as good in parts, that is to say, good in his judgment, but bad in his will ; excellent in taste, but avaricious and worldly and self-promoting. The Lord does not adopt that species of criticism ; the judgment of God is not eclectic, taking an excellence here and pointing out a default there ; the Lord looketh on the heart, and

when the heart goes it goes altogether, in one tremendous swing, in one awful plunge. Pray for the heart; say, Lord, save my poor heart! Sometimes it wants to turn away from the light and to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; sometimes it is weary with the paradise of thy grace and love, and it yearns to spend a night in the wilderness of its own passions: Lord, pity me, for the very atmosphere weighs upon me like a burden, and life is a mystery of pain. It takes all such prayer to save a man in the extremities of temptation. Sometimes he must be nothing but prayer; he must be an embodied supplication, an incarnate cry. Only they know this who have felt the devil's grip, who have felt the nearness of hell's burning, and who know how terrific a thing it is for the heart to be set on fire from below. One man cannot set himself against another in this matter. "The mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself:" the great man cannot stand aside, and say, I am not as others; the mean man cannot say, This is the lot only of those who are weak, and I must blame my circumstances for my apostasy. The mean man and the great man, the strong life and the weak life, the king and the fair woman and the little child are all involved in a common collapse. We must not speak of human nature in these separate details, but must regard it in its solidarity, and when Adam fell all men fell in him. But if this be the dark side of the picture, is there not a corresponding brightness? Is there not a second Adam greater than the first, a new humanity, a redeeming revelation, a saving, atoning personage? Hear the great solemn bell of history tolling out these words: "In Adam all die"; and then hear the silver trumpets of the sky delivering this gracious message, this hopeful, animating, eternal word: "In Christ shall all be made alive." The sentence is thus balanced: there is a universality on the one hand, and an impartiality on the other. The ways of the Lord are equal.

From the tenth verse we come upon the description of an earthquake. This is indeed an Old Testament passage. God is going now to judge the earth, and shake it terribly. Who can stand when he cometh?

"The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. For

the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low', (vers. 11, 12).

How poor is man when he is contrasted with that right quality! How great when compared with himself! Some men tall, others short of stature; some men wise, others not wise; some rich, others poor; some very great, and others obscure and insignificant and nothing accounted of; judged amongst themselves, all these comparisons are legitimate and are significant, but when man is set side by side with the God that made him, how are the lofty crushed down, how are the mighty brought into conscious weakness, how are all inequalities levelled in one pitiable and impotent monotony! That is the right standard of judgment. Comparing ourselves amongst ourselves we become wise; but comparing ourselves with the righteousness of God we are ashamed of our morality, and we even withdraw our prayers from divine attention. When the Lord ariseth to shake terribly the earth, what can men do? We have had such visitations, call them natural phenomena if you like, the argument still remains intact—what can man do even in the hour of the manifestation of "natural phenomena," if we like that phrase better than "the visitation of God"? Is the situation eased by describing an earthquake as a natural phenomenon? What can the judges do then, robed and seated in elevated positions, reading with piercing eyes the law of the country—what can they say when the court rocks to and fro because of the upheaval of the earth? What can the soldier do when the earth trembles under his feet? Helmeted with shield and spear, and all the panoply of war upon him, what can he do? Where is the sword that can strike an earthquake? where is the spear that can affright a natural phenomenon, and make it an obedient slave? What is the difference between a military commander and the frailest life that flutters at the grave's edge, even under the visitation of a "natural phenomenon"? By eliminating the word "God" you do not get rid of the natural phenomenon; by seizing that word and turning it to its finest uses, you may have peace and comfort even when the mountains are removed into the midst of the sea; but you do not get rid of the pain, peril, mystery, and whole possibility of ruin simply by taking the word "God" out of the tragic mystery of nature.

Will God, then, alone be great in relation to man? No, his greatness will show itself everywhere: not only shall men be put down in their pride, but nature shall be dwarfed:—

“And upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan, and upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up” (vers. 13, 14).

Nature shall be dwarfed when the Lord ariseth to shake terribly the earth. All the worlds are in the hollow of his hand; all the constellations are but flecks of light; all the marvels of the stellar presences that enrich the sky and make a mystery of it are but as a drop of the bucket. So man shall be brought low, and nature shall be humbled, and civilisation itself shall be abased:—

“And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall, and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures” (vers. 15, 16).

All shall go down in the tremendous cataclysm! Then shall men hold their idols in contempt—“The idols he shall utterly abolish.” What! Will he not spare one of them? Not one. Not the golden ones? No. Not the proofs of human ingenuity and invention? No: he shall utterly abolish: he shall blow with his mouth, and they shall flee away; he shall shake his hand at them, and they shall appear no more. All this is not prophecy, but history. Here we have a case set forth in high religious terms, in almost poetic imagery; but the kernel is solid and true, and is part of our own experience to-day. Let us waive for a moment the idea of literal earthquakes. There are earthquakes of another kind, if we may so accommodate the expression. There have been times in our experience when mighty men have gone down, and lofty men have been brought low, and when cedar and oak were of no consequence to us, and when the idols we have praised and trusted the most we have the most detested: we have hidden them; we have put them out of the way; we have turned to look in some kind of cowardly manner for a fire into which we might thrust them: we have been ashamed of our false religions and our false confidences. We claim, therefore, that this is not a romantic passage, ancient Hebrew poetry, but that in the sub-tone of it it is historical, experimental, as modern as our own consciousness and the facts of our own life. What visitations we have had! What tremendous

commercial upheavals! What shaking of social confidences! What distrust has been created in us regarding even the highest in the land! How we have seen the very props of society rotting before our vision, and how sometimes have we been inclined to pronounce all men vanity and lies! Again and again in history we have been made to see that man at his best estate is not to be trusted. "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?" In the midst of all this tempest of wrath and elemental shock and social dismay man will turn from man, cease from him, be conscious of his littleness and helplessness, and shall cry to the living God. The paint will be taken off, and the natural hideousness will be made to appear; the cloak will be torn from the shoulders, and the deformity will be revealed; and men shall be made to know that there is no solidity of character except in co-operation with God, identification with the living God, and the cultivation of the righteousness which Christ revealed, embodied, and made possible. Do not let us be content with promises, social arrangements, appearances, simulations; this is the fact, and the pulpit must declare it, and the Christian Church must affirm it, that there is no character that can stand pressure for a moment but the character that is inspired by the living One, and sustained by the Eternal. Nominal professors will often go wrong; not a living man but has done wrong in numberless instances, and will probably repeat all his wickedness and all his faults; but human shortcomings do not alter the reality of the internal argument, which is, that no man can be right except he is first right with God, and no man can be made right with God except through him who is the Way, the Truth, the Life—the blood-stained way, the way of sacrifice, atonement, and propitiation. When men are in the Son of God they are safe. When they are out of him they are not only unsafe—they are lost!

Chapter iii.

DIVINE JUDGMENTS.

THIS is a chapter of judgments, and the judgments are given in detail. These judgments are said to have taken place within the gates of a city, even the city of Jerusalem. A tempest in a desert may have features of grandeur ; but what of a tempest poured down with infinite fury upon the stately city, a city of palaces, temples, and treasures of art ? There the storm seems to be doubly furious and cruel. God made Jerusalem into a wilderness in the day of his wrath, and he turned the veil of her beauty into a blotch of leprosy. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Let us prove this by looking into the details of the case.

Note the completeness of the ruin :—

"For, behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, doth take away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stay and the staff, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water, the mighty man, and the man of war, the judge, and the prophet, and the prudent, and the ancient, the captain of fifty, and the honourable man, and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator" (vers. 1-3).

A remarkable expression.—"The Lord doth take away." There is a simplicity in the action that is terrifying. All these great treasures and dignities are not so firmly secured to us that a touch will not remove them, provided the touch be given by the finger of God. There is no expression of effort ; the very ease of the action is its most painful significance. "The Lord doth take away"—as a child might remove a toy ; as the weakest hand might remove from one position to another the lightest article that could be lifted. It is a complete detachment. When God takes away, who can tell where he puts the thing which he steals in the night-time ? Everything is secure, as we suppose, at eventide, and behold at the dawning of the day there is nothing left

but emptiness ! How have the things been removed ? Has God yoked the lightning to the load, and taken it away by a stupendous effort ? He has simply touched the mountains, and they have gone up in smoke ; he has looked at the rivers, and they have fled from his gaze ; he has laid his hand upon strength and beauty, and they have been turned into weakness and putrescence.

All these men and things God took away ; then what was left ? The whole meaning is not in the catalogue itself. Having perused the inventory of the things that were taken away, the heart asks in a tone of despair, Then what was left ? Bread gone, and water ; the mighty man, the man of great estates, the large freeholder ; and the soldier ; the judge, who held the balances so evenly ; the prophet, the man all eyes, who saw the future, and read it with the fluency of absolute acquaintance and sympathy ; and the prudent, the man who was not to be bewildered and confused in mind, whose mental action was steady, solid, and reliable ; and the ancient, the crown of grey hairs ; the captain of fifty, the very smallest military unit ; and the honourable man, the man of radiant countenance, who brought warmth with him and light into every society he entered ; and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer, the man who had knowledge of words, and the man who had knowledge of engineering ; and the eloquent orator—not only the man of noble and urgent speech, but, literally, the man who said the right word at the right time ; or, secondarily, the man who had a formula of incantation, uttering which all things became as he wished them to be—the eloquent orator, the man who kept within his heart the word of enchantment, forgot the word, and when he tried to pronounce it all things laughed at him scornfully : he said in effect, I can open the door for you by pronouncing a certain name ; show me where the obstinate gate is, and by the utterance of a word I will make it fall back on its hinges ; and they took him to the gate, and he began to speak, and he stumbled and fell, and the gate moved not in lock or hinge because of his impotent incantation. What ruin God can work ! When he sweeps his hand through the nations let those reap what he leaves behind, or glean or gather it if they can, and they will find their barns

rewarded with emptiness, and their courage will be a mortification and a pain.

It is so with the individual man. When God ruins a man there is nothing left: the bread has gone, and the water has gone, and might, and military temper, and the power of judgment, and insight, and prudence—all the lien which men have upon antiquity for the enrichment of experience; and all honour, and all counsel, and all cunning of fingers and hands, and the word of incantation forgotten—the man who once had only to speak and it was done, so persuasive was his word and so winning his tone, has forgotten his speech, or if he utters the magic words they have lost their music and their spell. This action is that of withdrawal. These men and powers and dignities and blessings have been simply “taken away.” Nor do we know our blessings until they are removed. We may have amongst us bread and water to satisfy; we may turn up our lips in scorn at such simple fare; the nation may be so crowded with mighty men and judges and prophets, prudent and ancient souls, honourable men and counsellors, and cunning artificers, and eloquent orators, until the plethora somewhat annoys us. We cannot look upon the redundancy of blessing, and keep our religious emotion upon a level with it. How shall God teach us the value of such privileges? Simply by taking them away. There need be no violence, no stroke of thunder, no clouding and darkening of the summer heavens; they have simply to be taken away from us, and then we shall know that a prophet hath been amongst us, and that bread was the very staff of life.

But the ruin does not end here. Mark the disorder and inversion of all natural relations and sequences. This dismal narrative is related between verses 4 and 7.

“And I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them” (ver. 4).

I will set Ahab in the kingdom at the age of twenty; Manasseh, a boy of twelve, shall wield the sceptre; Josiah at eight years of age shall be hailed as king. In an Eastern monarchy this was felt to be the deepest humiliation, that an inexperienced king, without pith, without the education which comes of much life,

should reign over the people, and invite to his counsels men of equal juvenility and inexperience. Oriental pride quailed before this degradation, and accounted it a political and imperial disaster.

"And the people shall be oppressed, every one by another, and every one by his neighbour: the child shall behave himself proudly against the ancient, and the base against the honourable" (ver. 5).

There is a natural relation of classes. Whilst all that is purely mechanical and arbitrary is to be viewed with suspicion, yet there is a natural sequence in things, there is indeed what is called a fitness or harmony of things; and when society is rightly inspired the base man knows that he is base, and his baseness is his weakness, and his weakness defines his position; and the child knows himself to be but a child, and therefore he behaves himself with discretion, and is limited by circumstances which he cannot control. Once let the moral centre be lost, and then you have lost all arithmetical counting, all geometrical relationship, all figure and form and mechanism and security, and the foursquare is thrown out of its parallel, and that which was right is numbered with that which is forbidden. How is society held together but by moral and political considerations? Some of the strongest men physically are amongst the weakest mentally and morally. When society is properly ordered and organised wisdom goes for everything: wisdom rules the city; wisdom directs the war; wisdom is consulted in the day of perplexity and in the night of desperation. Once let moral security give way, and you have this picture repeated: "The people shall be oppressed, every one by another, and every one by his neighbour": complete chaos shall reign; the child shall spit in the face of the ancient, and the base man shall claim the throne of the honourable. We are more dependent upon righteousness than we sometimes suppose. A sense of honesty keeps men right; a sense of moral inferiority determines the right classification of society. Aristocracy is mental, not hereditary. There is a genealogy of blood; there is also a genealogy of mind. When moral considerations are supreme all these questions are settled easily and finally.

"When a man shall take hold of his brother of the house of his father, saying, Thou hast clothing, be thou our ruler, and let this ruin be under thy

hand : in that day shall he swear, saying, I will not be an healer ; for in my house is neither bread nor clothing : make me not a ruler of the people " (vers. 6, 7).

Here we have the law of primogeniture. By the law of the state it was right that the eldest son should take a certain definite and ruling position. But he was naked ; he had not one rag with which to cover his nudity ; and seeing one of his younger brethren with a coat on, with a garment on, he sprang upon him and said, By that coat I ask thee to take my place : thou hast at least so much, and I have nothing ; come, be head of the family and be prince of the tribe. But the younger son scorned the proffered dignity. The moral base had gone, and therefore the mechanical dignity was of no account ; the pedestal of righteousness had been struck away, and the statue of nominal dignity fell into the dust. The picture is a vivid one, and is occurring in all its moral and more serious aspects every day. There comes a time when a man does not want to be mayor, or premier, or prince ; he says, All these are fictions, lies, hypocrisies, names without corresponding realities, paper behind which there is no bullion : I will not be king, for there is no kingdom to rule. How desolating are the judgments of God ! how he takes out the inside of things, and leaves the shell to mock the man who seizes it as if he were about to lay hands upon a prize ! What are our dignities if they have no religious allusion, and no spiritual value, and no heavenly guarantee of excellence and durability ? In all these things see what forfeitures men make by ill-behaviour, and how certain and complete is the judgment of God.

What a verse is the eighth ! We cannot even now read it without quailing under the awful representation—"For Jerusalem is ruined." We thought Jerusalem never could be ruined : the mountains were round about her, and to the old psalmists those mountains signified the security of the righteous. Is beauty no protection ? is ancient history of no account ? will not the dead kings of Judah speak for her in the time of her trial ? We cannot live upon our past, upon our forefathers, upon our vanished glories ; morality must be as fresh as the dew of the morning ; our righteousness must be as clear, personal, and definite as the action which we perform at the living moment. A man cannot

lay up a character and fall back upon it if his present conduct is out of keeping with it; he himself takes the juice and sap out of the character which he once lived. "Jerusalem is ruined." Why? There is a moral reason. There is always a moral reason for divine judgment. That reason reads thus: "Because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord, to provoke the eyes of his glory." In their fancy they give him eyes of omniscience, and in their action they defy those eyes to see the rottenness of their conduct. Men do not come to ruin because they are good; it is nowhere recorded that because a man prayed he was blasted by the lightning of heaven. Ruin has a moral explanation behind it, an explanation we may be ashamed to give, or to confess, or to recognise even within the secrecy of our own consciousness; but there is the eternal law—wherever there is death there has been sin: the wages of sin is death. We are not speaking now of the mere death of the body, of the death which dogs die, but of that second death, that inner decease, that *decessus* or exodus of the character, when the soul goes out of a man, and abandons him, because it has been ill-used, dethroned, discredited.

The proofs are adduced, and they are of a character which cannot be denied. In the ninth verse we read—"The shew of their countenance doth witness against them." Here is *primâ facie* evidence, as we should now phrase it. The proof of the internal decay is in the face. That face is an open book. Every blot shows blackly upon it. There are lines—hieroglyphical to those who cannot read, but full of expressiveness to those who have the seeing eye. Blessed be God, a man cannot be a villain without showing it! Pamper himself as he may, the bad lines on the face will come out now and then. Marvellous is the writing of the human countenance! Not that you find what is technically termed beauty there as a proof of moral excellence, mere form of feature, or line of bone, or tint of skin; we are not speaking of such superficial things in this connection; but the expression of the face, its sudden expressions, its expressions when it supposes itself to be inexpressive, the very concealment of the character which brings a kind of luminous vacancy into the eyes. Can a man drink deeply, and yet not show it in his face?

Can any man think bad thoughts lovingly—can he roll iniquity under his tongue as a sweet morsel, and gloat over it, and dream about it, and hail it in the morning, and bless it at night, without that loved demon working its wizardry on the face, taking out of the voice its solemn music, and casting into the gait of the wanderer the lurch of the vagabond? Men do not know this in all its reality. They have recourse to mechanical means for adorning themselves, for obliterating the traces of evil conduct; but they fail: the buried thing lifts itself up, and casts off the flower that was meant to hide its presence. A sudden expression reveals a character. "The shew of their countenance doth witness against them:" they have lost their spirituality, their ennobling reverence, their simplicity of soul, their genial smile, their impressive and self-interpreting frankness; they lurch, they wait, they glance furtively, and they blush; they show themselves to be devotees of sensuality. There is amid all their claim to the contrary a porcine look, a tone and manner which even the simplest can hardly misunderstand. The other truth, the beautiful truth, is equally vivid. What wonders grace works in a man! How it fills even an ordinary exterior with light! how the flame beautifies the lamp! how the Spirit of the indwelling God ennobles and dignifies the living house which he sanctifies by his presence. Thank God for the self-revelations of sin; bless God that a man cannot eat too much or drink too much without the blotch upon the skin signing him and sealing him fool and criminal. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

"They declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not." This indicates the possibility of coming to a condition of shamelessness. Men may sin so much as to glory in it. Men may glory in their shame. Repetition is no defence; familiarity does not mean excuse or mitigation. May not men speak profanely until they become unaware of their profanity? May not men drink so deeply as to be quite unconscious that they are drinking at all? And may we not do the forbidden deed so frequently that it comes to us with the ease of familiarity, and leaves not behind it the sting which should fill the soul with inexpressible torment? Sodom became brazen-faced; Sodom cared not for the God of

heaven ; and nothing but fire, brimstone, hell, could disinfect the locality which she disgraced. To what lengths may evil go ! but after a certain point that road becomes quite easy ; we do not so much walk over it as glide along it with most fatal and gratifying celerity.

On whose account was all this wrath displayed ? Does God play with lightnings, and show the artillery of heaven that he may make the universe afraid lest it provoke him ? No : God acts upon moral reasons ; and, as we have often had occasion to say, he never withholds those reasons from the criticism and judgment of the very men upon whom he pours out the vials of indignation. The reasons are given in verses 14, 15 :—

“For ye have eaten up the vineyard ; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor ? saith the Lord God of hosts.”

Who ever abandons the sanctuary, the poor should never go away ; who ever closes the Bible, the poor man should keep it lying widely open ; he should always have a Bible that opens easily, not stiffly, because it is well handled, and is the continual defence of men who cannot defend themselves. We must not turn the country into a stupendous money-making machine for our own use and furtherance. There is a legitimate and Christian socialism. The country should be a commonwealth. The danger is that all the countries now become gigantic betting-houses. Labour seems to be driven away ; there is hardly any honest healthy work to be obtained by thousands of people. Yet there is money enough. Yes, but it passes through the channels of speculation ; it is made to do a fevered work. Men do not like labour as they used to do ; they prefer the toss of the dice, the fortune won in an hour : it involves no detail ; it does not demand discipline, at least of a servile kind. All this means that the poor man must stand back : this is the game of the rich : only he who has thousands to risk can be admitted within this accursed ring. The poor must go out and do what they can. Let them, says the mocking voice, eat the dust beneath their feet ; we cannot be clogged with them, or hampered in our movements. So the countries of irreligious civilisation, or of nominal religious civilisation, are becoming gigantic stock ex-

changes. Money is not legitimately circulated ; it is not worked for. Blessed be the nation that loves to till its ground, to sow honest seed honestly, and to reap a good harvest thankfully. That is the way of life that will stand when all other ways have been proved to be rotten and unrighteous.

We have spoken much of judgment ; let us say that the judgment is not indiscriminate :—

“Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him : for they shall eat the fruit of their doings. Woe unto the wicked ! it shall be ill with him : for the reward of his hands shall be given him ” (vers. 10, 11).

This is not blind wrath ; the wrath is the more terrible that it is critical. There must be some escape from unregulated and aimless wrath—the blind fury that strikes without knowing at which or at what its blows are aimed ; men might get away from that fury ; but this is not mere fury, it is judgment : to the righteous, righteousness ; to the wicked—not an arbitrary punishment, but, “the reward of his hands shall be given him.” The wicked man digs his own hell. We must not think of hell as a divine invention ; may we not say it reverently ? it is an invention totally human. All evil digs and eats its own perdition ; all evil chokes its throat with brimstone of its own finding. O wicked man ! that harvest of wickedness is but the reaping of thine own sowing. How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation ? Men call the rocks and the mountains to fall upon them, but the rocks and the mountains stand still in stiff dignity, and have no answer to the bad man’s cry ; they are not allies of the devil ; the rocks are God’s own stone-houses, the mountains are altars of his own building ; they will not answer the cry of despair, the wail of sin. Whilst we say, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” we can also say with equal emphasis of voice, and with tenderer significance of tone, “God is Love.”

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we are of yesterday, and know nothing. Thou dost come up from everlasting, from the unbeginning time, and we cannot comprehend thee. Yet our time is part of God's eternity; through the mystery of time we may understand somewhat of thy duration, O thou who livest from everlasting to everlasting, without loss of strength or decay of glory. Enable us so to understand ourselves as to begin to see somewhat of the mystery of thy being; may we know that the divine seal is upon our own souls, and that if we study ourselves aright we shall begin to know somewhat of thy love and tenderness and compassion. Dwell within us, O Holy Spirit, ruling our understanding, our judgment, our will, our whole being, and sanctifying us until we become holy as our Father in heaven is holy. Great will be this miracle, and it lies only within thine own power to accomplish it; but with God all things are possible. We remember what we were, and what by thy grace we now are, and thus we look forward to the great completion of thy purpose in us, and foresee the time when we shall be sanctified, body, soul, and spirit. We commend ourselves to thee to this intent; we come not for mere enjoyment, for the excitement of high religious feeling that it may evaporate and issue in nothingness; we come that we may be perfected, strengthened, equipped for life's duty, and prepared for life's daily sacrifice. By this shall we know that we are in God, and that God is in us, that we hold ourselves lightly when he bids us lay down our lives, and that we are ready, morning, noon, and night, to open the door to the coming Lord, and give him all the welcome of love. O thou Son of God, whose eyes are full of tears, whose heart is full of tenderness, thou didst pity the sin of the world, and taste death for every man. Thou art still looking down upon the little earth, and still thine heart moves piteously and redeemingly towards it; thou dost weep over the city, thou dost lament the moral wilderness. Enable us to enter into sympathy with thee herein, that the world may not only show to us its sunny and flowery aspects, but may reveal to us its sin, its misery, all that debases its character and that overwhelms its purity: thus seeing the world as it is we shall be moved along Christian lines, we shall be inspired by Christian love, and our supreme desire will be to snatch some men from the burning, to bring some wanderers back again, and so to serve the Lord. The world lieth in wickedness; we are not deceived by the madness of its affected noise; underneath all the noise we hear the raving of moral insanity. The world is sick at heart; the earth is bearing a great load of iniquity. O Son of God, forsake not the place of thy mediation: pray for the world which thou hast redeemed; see the great tragedy completed, and establish the kingdom of righteousness upon the ruins of evil-doing. Thou knowest whose hearts are sore, whose lives are

blighted, whose hopes are clouded, and to whom to-morrow is a dread mystery coming fast upon black wings, and with purpose to destroy. Arm us against all fear; qualify us to do life's work with power and ease, with adequate faculty, and with unwavering and loving trust. Help especially those who are in great need of help; men who know not which way to turn; men who are imprisoned in darkness and afflicted with great infirmity. If we have sworn a holy vow at thine altar to be better, may the vow be redeemed in actual practice; if any man has set his hand to an evil record that he will break thy law and defy thy judgment, may he be swift to obliterate his folly. Watch by the bedside of the afflicted; make the empty cradle a greater blessing than the occupied cradle. Grant unto all souls exit from this land of darkness, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, into the city of life. Amen.

Chapter iv.

THE "BRANCH."

"And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach" (ver. 1).

THIS verse should be part of the preceding chapter, the very climax, indeed, of the ruin which Zion has brought upon herself. Read chap. iii. 25, 26: "Thy men shall fall by the sword, and thy mighty in the war. And her gates shall lament and mourn; and she being desolate shall sit upon the ground." Then follows:—

"And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach" (ver. 1).

In this verse the course of nature is inverted. This is the ruin which sin always works. The picture is that of a country desolated by war, and when the census comes to be taken it is found that there are seven women to one man. The men are murdered, the strong have been taken away, the mighty men have gone down in the shock of war. In this depopulation see what sin is always doing in every city and in every land. If we are afraid of the word "sin," substitute for it the word wrongdoing, unrighteousness, injustice, any term that does not bring with it some distinctive religious impression, and still the melancholy fact remains the same—he who does wrong ruins whatever he touches. Sin kills the mightiest—not in the obvious sense of taking away the life of the body, but in the subtle and

spiritual sense of perverting the mind, unbalancing the judgment, loosening moral integrity, creating in the interior nature carelessness regarding moral distinctions and moral judgments. This is not a theological view, or a theological prejudice; all this would be true were there no Bible, no church, no preacher, in the ordinary or conventional sense of the term. Who ever assails order assails security; who ever permits himself to think an ungenerous thought aims a blow at the very foundations of genuine, trustful, co-operative fellowship; who ever speaks one cruel, unjust, hostile word is an enemy of the commonwealth. The punishment of sin is not of a superstitious or theological kind. We are not to suppose that God's judgments are intellectual, metaphysical, spiritual only, and that some men are ranked as heretics, or sceptics, or doubters, or deniers, and there the matter¹ ends. Sin is not only the enemy of God; sin is the enemy of society. A man cannot violate the laws of health and yet be healthy; call it a spirit, a genius, a divine superintendence of things—call it what you please, yet there is the law, steady, solemn, inexorable, that the man who insults the spirit of health is made to feel his blasphemy in his own body. So throughout the whole scale: business is afflicted, social security is overturned, everything blooming, beautiful, sweet, which we designate by the name of health goes down in the tremendous judgment.

In the instance of the text we have simply the effect of war. War takes away from society the men of might, of strength, the stay of the family, those who ought to be the glory and the hope and confidence of society. What is true of war is true of every form of evil. There is not an imp in all the devil's service that does not trail after him manifold proof of evil and cruelty. It is important to recognise this, and apply it broadly and fearlessly, lest men should think that sin is something which lives within the church, or is in some sense a church term, or a theological puzzle, or a metaphysical difficulty, with which ordinary society has nothing to do; whereas sin is a term which gathers up into itself all lawbreaking, all dishonour of righteousness, all errors, mistakes, infirmities, that tend towards debasement of character and insecurity of life. Sin does not find its punishment in hell

only ; every day it creates its own perdition, and burns its own victims. Until we realise this in all its fulness we shall be quite unable to grapple with the difficulties of society, and to understand the mystery of suffering and the infinite penalty of wrong-doing.

But a light breaks upon the horizon : music is heard in the distance, the prophet turns from the depopulated land to behold a thing of beauty :—

“ In that day shall the branch of the Lord be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel ” (ver. 2).

We cannot pass over this word “ branch ” without wondering whether it is any allusion to the coming One who was Prince of peace, who was to fill the earth with righteousness, and people it with a seed that should call him blessed, in whose breath there should be no heat of war, yet whose very gospel is a sword unsheathed against every form of iniquity and evil. We must not force interpretations, nor import them ; yet we must be faithful to organic history ; we are entitled to bring the future to bear upon the past and the present when we know what that future is. In this instance we do know that there came One who was beautiful with all the freshness and rich with all the fruitfulness of heaven's paradise. If this is a reference to Christ, critics are agreed that it is the first personal reference to the Messiah which Isaiah has yet given. We should halt at first allusions ; we should be amazed at first miracles. If we are foolish enough to allow ourselves to grow into a familiarity which turns a miracle into a commonplace, we ought at all events on the first showing of the miracle to display some sign of wonder and interest.

How will Isaiah bring forth the Messiah to human view—under what imagery ? Isaiah is a man of majestic mind, the first politician in the land, the greatest statesman of his day ; he deals with kingdom and empire and destiny with right royal faculty : how will he disclose the Messianic reign ? Granted that the critics are right, and that the comparison of Scripture with Scripture will establish the identity of the Messiah with this prophecy, see how beautiful it is ! The Messiah shall come under the image of a “ Branch.” Mark the fitness of that figure

here. We have been passing through a land desolated by divine judgment; not one green thing has been left; the lava of holy wrath has spread sterility all along the line of its devouring and blighting course—what so beautiful as that a "branch" should appear in this wilderness of lava? What an imagination was that which, looking at the desolation on the one hand, pointed to a branch on the other—a branch, so to say, overgrowing the walls of heaven, and letting itself down within the view of human kind! Blessed are they who can turn away from the desert and look at the garden. This benediction holds good all through the circle of life. Let us dwell no longer upon the sterility, the barrenness, the ruin, consequent on judgment divine, but look at this green branch. It means so much. What does it mean? It means a word that is to be found within this very verse—"the fruit of the earth." The branch means fruitfulness, plenteousness of food, a challenge to hunger, an offer of hospitality. Mark also the fitness of the figure in this relation: war had taken away the father and the brother and the strong man of every name and degree, and left the land in a state of destitution: now a branch is seen. Fruitfulness is the idea of the branch; the leaves of it are for the healing of the nation. If this *does* refer to the Messiah, surely no more fitting and beautiful image could have been selected even by inspired fancy. A "branch,"—then the fountains of life and energy are not dried up. It takes the whole summer to make one little daisy. We are apt to suppose that the tiny flowers are all thrown in, and did not require any astronomic action for their production. There is not a violet hidden in the green hedgerow that did not require all the solar system as gathered up in this earth to produce it. If we say that one swallow does not make a summer, it nevertheless takes the summer to make one swallow. Show a little green leaf, and you show a whole summer of heaven; that is the meaning of it, rightly and broadly interpreted. He is but a literalist who says, This is only one little leaf, and there is an end of it. There is no end of the least leaf that gleams greenly and beautifully in the sun; it means that summer is at hand; it means that the great water-system and fire-system of the universe is still in regular action; the little green messenger comes ahead of the advancing host. Blessed is he who has an eye for the interpretation of signs,

significances, for all things that hold in themselves something larger than themselves. Then a branch is promised : * that is to say, fruitfulness, beauty, sufficiency, energy, summer. This is what the Son of God came to be and to do—to fill the earth with fruitfulness, to drive away the ghastly, all-devouring famine, and to feed the world with the fruit of heaven.

Still the light glows on the whole horizon. The prophet sees a new Jerusalem :—

“And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem” (ver. 3).

How full of suggestion is every word in this pregnant verse ! “He that is left in Zion.” We thought nothing had been left there. That is our mistake always. God knows what men are left, what lives are hidden, what influences have been overlooked or uncalculated. God has never yet left the world without a

* “ . . . After refreshing pious souls with delineating future (Messianic) glories, Isaiah is recalled by the sad present. Far distant is God's people as yet from the high calling of being the teacher of the world. ‘All is now wrong. Heathenism is flooding the land with charmers and diviners, with silver and gold, with horses and chariots, and with idols ! Jehovah, forgive them not !—Jehovah's day of judgment is coming, when all human glory shall disappear before his glory, and in consternation Hebrew idolaters shall hurl their images into any corner. Lo, Jehovah-Zebaoth will take away every stay of order and well-being in the state, leaving only the refuse of society to rule (if indeed they will) the desolated city. Look at them only ! They are as shameless as Sodom ! O my people, thy leaders lead thee astray, thy princes oppress : what mean ye that ye grind the faces of my poor ? saith Jehovah. Look again at their ladies, with their jewels and their head-gear, and their fine dresses and their trinkets ! Jehovah will take all of it away, leaving to them only shame and sackcloth. Yes, Zion shall lose both sons and daughters (so many are they who offend !), and bereaved of all shall sit on the bare ground. Yet out of these judgments shall issue purity and peace. He, the Branch of Jehovah's appointing (iv. 2), shall appear in glory, and the redeemed springing out of the earth shall shine with accordant splendour in what is left of Israel. All in Zion shall then be holy, and the pillar of fire by night, and the overshadowing cloud by day, shall as of yore cheer and protect ;—what is precious must need be protected ! Sweet shall be the security and refreshment of those days.’ ”—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

nucleus of heaven: he has drowned the world, but left a seed to build an altar; he has burned the Gomorrahs of the world, but he has allowed the faithful to escape, and to become the beginning of a new progeny. There is always a remnant, the one left, the true heart, the faithful among the faithless found. If this is the genius of history, we cannot escape its broadest religious interpretations. There are miracles of providence if there are none in nature. When we have denied that the sea was ever quieted, or the dead were ever raised, or the lame were made to leap and praise God because of reconstruction, we have not got rid of the greater miracles of providence, the marvels of history, the things we never saw, and never created, and never dreamed; the mysterious subtle action and interaction of life upon life—these phenomena will remain to make men wonder, and to make some men pray. There may be a nucleus left in the individual man. That is the most tenderly encouraging thought so far as we are concerned. What if the man himself be not wholly left without God? There may be an occasional tear that has in it all the meaning of summer's first little leaf; there may be a shock of surprise, which shows that even yet the man's soul is not dead; there may be an occasional turning to holy memory, to ancient vows, and a sighing after the fellowships which once made life glad: these things being interpreted signify that there is a nucleus left in the man, a little germ, a point where God himself can begin: "Quench not the Spirit." Even an occasional appearance at church may mean much; even a desire that the child may become a better man than you are may be a proof that God's ministry has not yet done operating in your heart, and importuning you for the sacrifice of your love.

"Every one that is written among the living." This is an idea which runs through the whole Bible—the idea of a book, a register, a life-record, with names written one after the other. Moses knew of that book, and wanted all the people's names to be written in it; and once he was so eager that the registration should be complete, that he could have offered that his own name should not be on the record rather than that the whole people should be lost. In the Apocalypse there is a book, and another book called the Book of Life, and they that are written therein

shall have a right to enter the gates of the city ; and between these there is the testimony of the blessed Christ. "Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you ; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven." How almost impossible it is for God to obliterate names written in that book ! Let every man ask, Is my name there ? The names are written as with blood ; they are not inscribed with earth's fading ink, they are written with blood shed in sacrifice. O mystery of love, O mystery that appals, that closes the eyes because of its brightness, a brightness intolerable ! What is it to have the name written elsewhere if it be not written in the Book of Life ? All other books will perish in the flame ; only the writing of God will survive. In that register the humblest man may have a place ; in that record the obscurest life may be regarded with all the amplitude which characterises anxious love. Pitiab!e is the life of him whose name is written everywhere but in the life-book ! He is the victim of death ; he has chosen a perishable fame. Choose you this day whom ye will serve—where your record shall be made, where your names shall be found, and let every heart say, Lord, write my name who may, do thou write it, and give me pledge and proof in my own heart that my name is written in the books which cannot be burned.

But before this, and concurrently with this, there must be washing and cleansing even "by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning,"—say, by the breath of judgment, the great, mighty, disinfecting whirlwind of God to take away all trace of putrescence and pestilence. Some cleansing must be by fire. Aye, the fire will destroy ; and some must be destroyed before they can be recreated. God's ministers are many, mighty as the wind, ardent as fire, all-expanding as the generous wind that feeds the whole globe with life, and intense, penetrating, unsparing as a burning fire. "Our God is a consuming fire." He will consume only the dross, the wickedness, the evil : no speck of gold will he destroy ; he will save all that can be saved. When Jesus comes to add up the result of his ministry he will say, I have lost none but the son of waste : he would not come within the circle of my love ; he is wasted, for he was the son of waste.

The prophet sees the bright day for Jerusalem, for Zion, for the whole land, for all peoples ; he sees—

"A shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain" (ver. 6).

That is the right architecture. Asked of what architecture is your building, and it will be a poor answer if it do not include a shadow, a place of refuge, a covert from storm and rain. This is the meaning of God's house in the world ; this is what is intended when it is said the tabernacle of God is with men upon the earth. What is that tabernacle ? Precisely what it is described to be in this verse—a shadow from the heat, a place of refuge, a covert from storm and from rain : the poor man's house, the helpless man's asylum, the retreat to which all may repair who are suffering the burden and the discipline of life. Open wide its gates ; never close them ; write on the portals of the house, This is my Father's house, where there is bread enough and to spare. A church that falls short of this ideal is no church of the living God. However large and handsome, however associated with pomp and circumstance, it is no house of God if broken hearts cannot come to it, and be so comforted by song, and holy reading, and tender prayer, and noble exposition of words divine, as to return to the world's fight whole, strong, resolute, hopeful. If any man, poorest of the sons of men, should come into the church and hear the preacher say one word in defence of unrighteousness, that man has a right to declare that the only proper motto for that house is "Ichabod ;" if any man shall speak for the rich as against the poor in God's house he defiles the altar ; if any man should be severe upon the errors and mistakes of the poor, and should treat with a light hand the criminalities of the rich, he is a liar in the sight of God. The house of Christ should be a home, a refuge, a covert, a shadow from the great heat ; and men should go up with joy saying, There if nowhere else we shall find all we want. In that day the house of God will be the centre of life, the very focus of truest pleasure, satisfaction, joy. This is the Bible idea of the tabernacle, the temple, the synagogue, the church—that it should be a place of refuge, and a covert from storm and from rain.

If any severe word is spoken in the sanctuary, it should be so

spoken as that the soul shall recognise it as involving a wise and necessary discipline. There should be no harshness in the severity ; it should be so solemn, so dignified, so just, as to commend itself, and to prove that any other tone would be out of place in the earnest expostulation. But after the severity will come the gospel, the promise, the great evangelical welcome, the holy, tender, brotherly, most human appeal, saying, Come, let us hasten to the altar, the house of God, for under its roof dwells the Spirit itself ; and as for its table it is spread with viands needful to the sustenance of manhood. There in our Father's house we shall have protection, security, inspiration, sentiment that will make us glad, but sentiment that shall develop itself into inspiration, that shall face the world with a stern courage and an irrepressible and triumphant hope. When men sneer at others for going to church, the sneer implies an ignorance of what the church really is. That the church has been debased, or ill-used, or perverted, or narrowed in some way so as to be other than what God meant it to be, may be true enough ; but in that house every living man, black and white, has a right to be, and the poorest should be, as much at home as the richest ; and it should be the joy of the rich to make the poor man feel that here his poverty is no crime. Let this be our ideal of God's house, and the house will prove its necessity by its utility. Let the house be put to the largest uses, and the sanctuary will need no defence in words ; men will go away from it saying, We cannot do without it ; it is needful to complete the circle of life. There are other houses, but they are very small ; there are other tables, but our hunger is greater than the provision ; there are other opportunities of enjoyment, but the enjoyment is partial or superficial : only in God's house do we hear a music that reaches the soul, listen to voices that make even our poverty a blessing, and see a light above the brightness of the sun.

Chapter v. 1-7.

"Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: and I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry" (vers. 1-7).

HUMAN LIFE IN PARABLE.

THIS is a parable which by so much brings with it its own literal interpretation. With that literal interpretation we, of course, have next to nothing to do; we must look for the interpretation which involves ourselves, our opportunities, and our destinies.

"Now will I sing" (ver. 1). That is often a suggestive expression in Holy Scripture, unless it is found in a purely poetical book, where there is, indeed, nothing but song. The song is a parable. When did Jesus Christ speak a parable that was not full of reproach, rebuke, profound and terrible judgment? Yet who expects this in a song, in a parable, in a picture which is, or ought to be according to our expectations, a thing of beauty? When music is made an instrument of judgment, the lesson is most pathetic and solemn. When the prophet says he will sing, we gather around him with expectant delight, for we love music: we say, In music there is no argument, and there can be

no judgment : so let us come near the singing prophet, and hear the music which will elevate our imagination and do us good, without inflicting upon us the sharpness and accusation of personal criticism. The singing of Scripture is critical ; the parables of Scripture are phases of judgment. Is the parable of the Good Samaritan a very charming picture ? To this inquiry there can be but one reply : for what can be more true to life, true to nature in its deepest moods and finest aspirations ? Yet that parable is a judgment upon the Samaritan-despising Jew : only the Son of God could have uttered it, for he had no friends when he spoke it ; he hurled this parable like a thunderbolt into the very camp of the enemy. Is the parable of the Prodigal Son a parable marked by supreme loveliness ? Is it the very tenderest and largest interpretation of human nature ? We may fairly answer the inquiry in a grateful affirmative. But even the parable of the Prodigal Son is a judgment ; it is a judgment upon the elder brother,—that pharisaic, self-complacent, self-righteous element in life, which thinks it has only to pray in order to patronise God, and to hold up the shield of its virtue and come back every night from life's battlefield more than conqueror. Is the parable of the Lost Sheep a parable in which there is no judgment ? Verily not : it is a judgment upon all who have hard notions about the lost ; it is very pitiful in one of its aspects, but it is a severe and uncompromising judgment upon those who have no room in their hearts for the penitent, the contrite, and those who truly deplore their sin. So with the songs of Scripture. The song of Deborah we have seen to be like a gathering of sabres, spears, battle instruments of every kind ; verily she was a mother who judged Israel, and whose song was punctuated with instruments of war. The prophet, then, will not sing a song without words. Oftentimes the pith of the song is in the sentiment. What is mere sound but an appeal to the ear ? We must hear the words, and if the words come into our hearts the more readily because of the sweetness of the song, rely upon it they are not expected to pass through the heart without leaving an impression behind ; they are meant gracefully to summon the life to self-inquest and self-judgment. Jesus Christ spoke about the vineyard. He has two vineyard parables. The second of them is like the song of the prophet. It was so sung to those who

listened that at the last they said: He means that we have wrested the vineyard from the heir; he is intending to judge us—and they gnashed their teeth in impotent rage: blessed is that parabolist who can so sing his song that the people will take up the application without any formal appeal from him: blessed is that Nathan who can so unfold his parable in the hearing of his listener that the man shall convict himself, and save Nathan the trouble of a personal appeal: blessed is that prophet who, by argument, by song, by appeal, by rhetoric, by eloquence, by moral feeling, can so work upon the people that at the last they will know to whom the message was delivered, and will silently accept it for further application in the silence of solitude, in the absence of tumult.

Let us see how this parable applies to us. Its whole application can be secured and understood if we look upon it as representing human life as we ourselves know it and embody it. We take away, therefore, “the house of Israel, and the men of Judah,” and we put down *human life* in the seventh verse as the interpreting word. Now let us know how this singer can sing, and how far his notes tell upon every human nerve with judicial yet gracious effect.

Here is human life placed in a good situation, “In a very fruitful hill” (ver. 1). Can any man justly complain that he has been placed where the sun never reaches him, and where the baptism of life is denied? Is it possible to live in a civilised country, even in the obscurest position, without feeling the whole atmosphere of civilisation operating upon the life? The metropolis itself in its great busy streets is a day-school, an academy, a university; the very windows of the great town seem to be doors that open upon temples of knowledge and wisdom; foreign lands are focalised in the great cities of any civilised country, and an intangible and immeasurable something testifies that the whole air is pregnant with educational influences, and we have but to open ourselves to their reception and yield ourselves to their operations to become educated,—not in some technical, pedantic, or literary sense, but, still, led out, enlarged, stimulated, and qualified every day to use a broader and keener faculty than

yesterday was at our service. Charles Kingsley says a walk along the streets of London is an intellectual tonic. The city-born has an advantage which the pure rustic cannot have, and the pure rustic has his advantages which the city-born cannot enjoy within the limits of the metropolis. All nature sings: the whole heaven is an infinite picture-gallery: all the fields have gospels according to themselves;—blessed is the hearing ear, for every bird shall be an evangel, and all nature shall be lighted up so as to illuminate and gladden the soul. We might dwell on the other side of the picture; but would that be wholly just? Have we not had advantages? Some have had grievous disadvantages and burdens too heavy to carry. What men they might have been had their chance been equal with the chance which others have enjoyed! By nature how endowed, how quick of eye, how responsive of heart, how ready of faculty! and yet they have been mewed up, or crushed down, or trodden upon, so that they have had no opportunity equal to their native endowment. But consult them, and they have a grateful answer to the inquiry, Have you not been placed in a favourable situation? They could see where the situation might have been enlarged and improved, where some aspect might have been sunnier, and where some opportunity might have been larger; but they say, Thank God, we have not been left without opportunity and blessing and inspiration, and if we have failed we dare not, in simple justice, blame our Creator and God. Have we been faithful to our advantages?

Here is human life as the subject of detailed care:—

“And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein” (ver. 2).

Then he stood back and waited like a husbandman. The vineyard was upon a hill, and therefore could not be ploughed. How blessed are those vineyards that are cultivated by the hand! There is a magnetism in the hand of love that you cannot have in an iron plough. He gathered out the stones thereof one by one . . . he fenced . . . he built . . . he made a winepress. It is hand-made. Your mechanics and your manufactures have their value, but the aged will tell you that

there is a singular charm about the house-goods that were hand-made; they take them up so lovingly, and say, These were hand-sewn; these were made at home.

There is a peculiar delight in rightly accepting the handling of God. We are not cultivated by the great ploughs of the constellations and the laws of nature; we are handled by the Living One, our names are engraven on the palms of his hands: "The right hand of the Lord doeth gloriously." Human life, then, is the subject of detailed care; everything, how minute soever, is done as if it were the only thing to be done; every man feels that there is a care directed to him which might belong to an only son. We speak of One who is God's only begotten and well-beloved Son, and he must ever retain that primacy and distinctiveness; yet there is another sense in which every man may say he is treated as if he were God's only child, and on him is lavished an infinitude of divine grace, and care, and love. So with every flower that blooms: the tiniest of the floral tribe could say, It needed all the solar system to grow me: I am not some little thing flung in without signature or trace of care; it required all that the greatest oak in Bashan needed to bring me to my grade of perfection. What has been left undone of the nature of care that we can point out, and concerning which we can with justice question God? What have we? Reason, feeling, imagination, nurture for the body, care for the soul, alphabets like doors opening upon all languages, and a Book that combines within its limits all libraries, and then promises entrance into the high school, the academy of heaven. Let us reckon up our advantages, make an inventory of them; be careful about each line, omitting nothing, and setting down everything in a clear and visible hand; and add the running figures into a sum-total, and stand amazed before the last astounding result of grace and care. Look at any one joint in your body, and see all God's power in that easy movement. Point to one thing on which God's signature is not written as attesting the greatness of his creatorship and the minuteness of his care and love.

Human life is next regarded as the object of a just expectation:—
"He looked that it should bring forth grapes" (ver. 2).

Why not? Had he not a right to do so? Is there not a

sequence of events? When men sow certain seed, have they not a right to look for a certain crop? When they pass through certain processes in education, or in commerce, or in statesmanship, have they not a right to expect that the end should correspond with the beginning? Who likes to lose all his care? Whose heart does not break when he thinks that all he has done has ended in nothing? He worked hard, he sacrificed his own indulgence, he pinched himself at many a point to give his child a good schooling; he secretly said, I have no money to leave the boy, but he shall have all the education I can give him, and then, perhaps, he may make a man of himself under the blessing of God; and when if at the last it comes to failure, shame, ruin, whose heart does not break under the awful consequence? There are just expectations in life. Has a minister no such expectations? Having spent his days in study and his nights in prayer, and having planned his life in order to teach, encourage, and comfort his people,—if at the last they are broken staves in his hand, which pierce him when in his old age he leans upon them, the bitterness of death is doubled by such painful disappointment and such shameful ingratitude. The principle runs throughout society. From certain beginnings certain endings may be calculated, and the calculation is rational and just.

See, in the next place, human life as the occasion of a bitter disappointment. “It brought forth wild grapes” (ver. 2). Then, what have circumstances to do with the development of life? The circumstances in this case were perfect, the environment was divine in its scope and its adaptation. Let us read again the words which describe the vineyard: “My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein.” And having done all that hands could do he waited. This is God’s attitude. Having set up the Cross of his Son in the midst of the ages, and having preached the gospel to every creature, all that even the Almighty could do is to wait. In this instance he waited, and in due season he went for the grapes, and he saw that his vineyard brought forth wild grapes. Have we had no

experience of the same kind? Without going into the lives of others, let us hold severest inquest upon our own lives. What has been the issue of all our education and opportunity, all our gracious fellowships, and all the inspiration which has blessed our lives? Are we to-day further on in all goodness and strength than we were, say, ten years ago? Are we as impatient, as fretful, as resentful, as sensitive to all slight, neglect, and injury as we used to be? or are we loftier in mind, larger in thought, fuller in charity, more hopeful regarding the worst, more Christlike? It is for each man to answer these judgment questions for himself and to himself. We may lose great advantage if we make public confession about these things. Sometimes it is well to sit down at our own judgment-seat, receive the sentence, and quietly ponder it in a silence so deep as to be almost religious!

Does God encounter all this with anger? Not until he has uttered himself in surprise and grief:—

“What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” (ver. 4).

God asks, as it were, whether he can blame himself; whether anything has escaped Omniscience; whether he has failed in blessing that might have resulted in abundance of luscious fruit: then mentally he goes over the whole situation; he remembers the selection of the hill, the fencing, the gathering-out of the stones, the planting of the choicest vine, the building of the tower in the midst of it, and the erection of the winepress; and as he reads the history of his own doings he seems to challenge the vineyard and the universe to suggest one omission. Let me judge myself! Could anything more have been done for me than has been done? I am constrained to answer, There has been nothing lacking on the part of God. It is not for me to compare myself with other men, and to say their advantages have been greater than mine; possibly that may be so; yet I have had advantages enough to have brought forth an abundance of grateful fruit. How much have I produced? Are mine lifeless branches? Are my grapes wild grapes? These are the questions that tear the life, these the songs the music of which we forget in the terribleness of their judgment. But this is healthy investigation;

this is the kind of heart-searching which, if properly received, ends in edification. We cannot repent sooner than to-day ; behold, now is the accepted time for repentance ; now is the chosen hour for the real improvement of our innermost life.

Who can read the fifth and sixth verses in the right tone ? Is there any teacher of elocution who can tell us how to read these verses ? The first suggestion is that they should be read with a rending, strident, judging voice, made keen with reproach ; then the second suggestion is whether they may not be so read as to indicate the welling-up of hot tears, the feeling of sobbing grief.

"And now go to ; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard : I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up ; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down : and I will lay it waste : it shall not be pruned, nor digged ; but there shall come up briers and thorns : I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it " (vers. 5, 6).

Are these merely objurgatory sentences, and have they to be read as with the stormy wind of indignant judgment ? Is not every word a tear ? There is a judgment that is gracious ; there are sentences full of awful suggestion which owe their graciousness to their awfulness. God will not allow the nominal advantage to stand without the spiritual advantage following. The church must be pulled down if the people are not praying in it. Do not let stand a lie in stone and plaster. If the church is within itself a falsehood, take down the honest stones, and do not make them parties to high treason ! This is just to ill-used nature. Where "Ichabod" is on the door take the portals down ; unroof the deconsecrated sanctuary, and by so much restore the honour of the altar as to cast it down, and throw back the stones into the quarry whence they were brought.

Life is given for culture. It is not the best at the first ; it has to be fenced, and the stones are to be taken out, and the choice vine is to be planted, and the tower is to be set in the midst of it, and the winepress is to be built therein. The child is but the beginning ; the man should be the cultivated result. Culture is bestowed for fruit. Culture is not given for mere decoration, ornamentation, or for the purpose of exciting attention, and

invoking and securing applause ; the meaning of culture, ploughing, digging, sowing is—fruit, good fruit, usable fruit, fruit for the healing of the nations. The fruit for which culture is bestowed is moral. God looked for judgment and God looked for righteousness. We have not been trained to be intellectual athletes, to be great mental gladiators, vexing one another with emulous skill and energy, each equal to the other, so that the fight keeps in an even balance, and none can tell the end of the rivalry ; the meaning of all reading, experience, suffering, prayer, singing, Christian fellowship is fruit, of judgment and of righteousness. The moral appeal of the Scripture proves the inspiration of the Bible. Even a parable is not a creation of fancy ending in a rainbow-like beauty ; it is more beautiful than any rainbow, yet it indicates promise, covenant, righteousness, and issue of goodness.¹

Mark how discriminating is the judgment of God—“He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.” They were grapes, but not the right sort ; there was no denying that they were the fruit of the vine, but the grapes were wild, they were not the right quality, they were bitter with disappointment, they were small, sapless, savourless, useless ; they were unequal to the occasion ; they did not correspond with their environment, their conditions, their opportunities : they were an irony which God could not tolerate—what if he crushed them in his hand, and threw them from him with anger, disappointment, and bitterest grief ? It is not enough that we bear grapes or fruit ; we must keep in mind that quality is the end of conduct ; that character will be judged not simply as character, but as involving elements of righteousness, truth, justice, love, purity—the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, meekness, charity—all these. Oh, blessed Husbandman, Vine-dresser of thy creatures, when thou comest may we be in a position to give thee much fruit, for herein is our Father glorified !

Chapter v. 8-22.

SIN AND JUDGMENT.

WE find similar maledictions pronounced by Jesus Christ in the sixth chapter of Luke. In the earlier prophecies there is no precedent or parallel to these pronouncements of woe. Where heaven is so angry there must be some reason for the anger; it is our business to endeavour to discover that reason, and inquire into our own relation towards it.

“Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!” (ver. 8).

In order to understand this we must remember the conditions of life in Northern Palestine at the time when these woes were pronounced. It was village life: men had little freeholds of their own: it was a life marked by small proprietorships; almost every man had some little patch of vineyard. The disposition, however, was to do away with small proprietories, and for the greater men to grasp all the land, so that Palestine might have its great landlords; and so urgently did this spirit assert itself that even the little freeholders of Palestine were in many cases forced into a position of slavery, and made to toil as slaves on the lands which they once honestly owned and hopefully cultivated. This was seen by some one—blessed be God! whoever he was, he was just—and he cried: “Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!”—the men who swallowed up all who were smaller than themselves, and who grasped at everything with an insatiable and inappeasable voracity. All things went down before that spirit of covetousness. That is, as some one has well termed it, the dry drunkenness; the appetite that drinks everything, and whose thirst is never quenched. The Lord had always

been careful about the boundaries of little property. We have studied Deut. xix. 14: "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance, which thou shalt inherit in the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it." But at the time to which the prophecy of Isaiah refers landmarks went for nothing; the Titanic landlord was coming down to add field to field, perish who might in the gratification of his covetousness. There was a law of debt amongst the ancient people—a very beautiful and gracious law. When Nehemiah went to inquire into the condition of the people at the time referred to in his Book, he found them in sad plight—"Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth"—we have practically parted with the very last patch of land we had that we might simply keep the wolf from the door. "There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards:" the taxes were so high that we could not pay them out of our earnings, and therefore we have had to borrow to pay the tax-gatherer. "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards." Now read the judgment in the light of these explanations. Consider the state of the land at the time; then hear this voice, and say whether it come from hell or heaven: "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!" Whose voice is that? We need not ask questions regarding the inspiration of a book whose tone is thus so broadly moral, so loftily just, so minutely careful of the rights of little men—little, hard-working, industrious, frugal freeholders. How strong is the Bible in its moral majesty! Why do not men begin at that point when they inquire into the merits of the Book? Why will they fix upon antiquities, chronologies, the distribution of the books in their relation to one another? Why do they not fasten upon the judgment spirit that is in the Book, and acquaint themselves with the moral

purpose of the revelation, and then work their way to all outermost and incidental things?

Is God content with pronouncing these judgments? He says:—

“In mine ears said the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah” (vers. 9, 10.)

There is where the Lord has his hold upon these mighty people: they can get the land, but they cannot ensure the crops. After all, there is a mysterious Power that holds things in its great grip. The great landlords have added field to field, and house to house, and driven off the small proprietors, and now they are going to have everything their own way; and they sow their acres, and their acres will not bring forth fruit. The *bath* is about seven gallons and a half; the *acre* was ground that could be ploughed in a day by a yoke of oxen; a *homer* was about thirty-two pecks, and an *ephah* was about a tenth of that quantity. So, when men looked for a good amount of produce, behold, they had one-tenth of it! It is curious to observe the operation of a law. Success won as these men won it is like a bird with one wing—it can only flap and flutter, but never fly. The Lord looked down from heaven, and saw the avaricious men taking the little vineyard from Naboth, removing the landmark, despoiling the small proprietors; he saw these “successful” men fattening themselves in their prosperity, and heard their infamous chuckle as they supposed themselves to have accomplished their malign purpose. What hold has God upon the land? He has all the hold at the end which we call the crop or the harvest; he will command the clouds that they rain not upon the ill-gotten land; he will make the land a burden to those who have too much of it, and who have got it unjustly. A man cannot have too much of anything if he gathers it justly as the fruit of industry, and well-expended mind, and care, and thought; but when all his gettings are but so many successes of injustice, the land that he boasts of shall become a burden to him, and he will cry one day, Who will take it off my hands? When the harvests are bad for ten years running men begin to think about causes, and though it may be possible for superstition to push the

inquiry too far, and into obviously unjustifiable exaggerations, yet he is no foolish man who bethinks himself whether after all there may not lie behind the most material facts a moral mystery. Again we say, How great is the moral majesty of the Bible! When has judgment forsaken the earth? At what time has there been no sign of the divine Presence, or the divine care? All history testifies to God's presence.

After all this grasping what happens?

"Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!" (ver. 11).

After injustice comes luxury. Bad men, though they cannot calculate upon the next harvest with any certainty, will eat and drink as though they could. It is matter of history that oftentimes the morning revel was continued until the evening debauch. The whole land was given up to evil banqueting—to eating and drinking damnation. "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink"—the drink made out of honey and dates, the poisonous Egyptian beer, that inflamed men's blood, and killed any spark of divinity that might be in them. Beginning the day with intoxication! That was an ancient habit; is there ought of the kind to-day? Have we not sometimes seen young men leaving the tavern so early as ten o'clock in the morning? Have we not seen women, who ought to be the saviours of the world, drying their lips on the tavern step ere well the sun be risen? The fascination of evil, how subtle, how mighty, how tremendous! The appetite that is within us, how often uncontrollable! how it takes no heed of decency! how it sinks into Sodomite shamelessness! An officer was commended to King Alphonso as a man who could drink much, and retain what he drank. Said the king, "That is an excellent quality in a sponge, but not in a man." May we not learn from those who are philosophical observers of history, if we care not to consult the fanatical moralists and pietists who may be under the influence of superstition? Mahomet said, "In every grape there dwells a devil." This is no hallucination of the modern mind, with its fine-spun ethics, and its new philanthropy, and its moral veneer and conventional appearance. If the devil has been a liar and a murderer from the beginning, so has strong drink;

it has no good history ; its whole record is a bad one. Mark the pampering of the animal life. The whole nature went down. Only one appetite was served and satisfied—if that can be satisfied which grows by what it feeds on. Can a man cultivate his animal life and his spiritual life at the same time ? All history says that such a course of conduct is simply impossible. It comes in the issue to one of two things : either the body must conquer, or the soul must conquer. Grieve not the Spirit : quench not the Spirit. It is possible to slay God within the soul.

The destruction of religion follows all this extinction of the finest aspirations of the human heart and mind. You cannot attack moral nobility at any point without involving the whole altar of worship and sacrifice and redemption. What is the consequence religiously ? That is pointed out in the twelfth verse:—

“And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts : but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands.”

We cannot be both animal and spiritual, gross and refined, satisfying the appetites of the body and gratifying the aspirations of the soul. It is recorded of some that they were so afraid of the lightning and the thunder that they not only closed their eyes to hide themselves from the vision of the playful fire, but they brought out all their musical instruments, as drums and trumpets and tabrets, to quell the infinite reverberating of the thunder. But who can silence the artillery of the clouds ? Yet men are every day trying to shut out the voice of judgment from the ear by making grievous noises of their own. The people did not regard the work of the Lord, they took no heed of it : the heavens were not fields of starry beauty or solar parable to them, for their bloodshot eyes never looked at the empyrean, at the infinite circle of glory ; and the whole earth, with all its carpeting of flowers, was nothing to them but a place to be thrust into at the last when flesh and blood could no longer stand erect. What was the consequence ? “Therefore my people are gone into captivity” (ver. 13). Not immediately, but morally, and in reality. Find sin in one verse, and you find captivity in the next. Still the Bible maintains its grand moral position, its unrivalled

supremacy. Who ever sins goes into bondage. Not only they are in bondage who are shut up within thick walls, and who are condemned to spend the remainder of their days in iron cages; they are in captivity who have voices within them asking for evil things to which they cannot say no. They may drive to their banqueting in chariots of gold drawn by steeds of finest mettle, but they are galloping only to their prison. If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed; if you have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man you cannot be in prison, you cannot tell the meaning of abridged liberty; you have a glorious freedom. He who is good may walk the earth a free man, though he have but little to eat and nowhere to lay his head. Character is freedom; pureness is liberty; to have few wants is to be rich; to be master of yourself is to be conqueror of the world. These great laws never alter: why do not men fix their attention upon these, and gather around the Bible to say, This is none other than the living word of the living God, keeping the ages pure, and guaranteeing for moral greatness ultimate establishment and coronation? Men go into captivity when they go into sin.

Mark the ruin, note the havoc:—

“Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it” (ver. 14).

What other picture can compare with this for lurid vividness? Let us change the word “hell,” and substitute what is probably the literal meaning of the prophet—Therefore the under-world, the Hadean sphere, the world of shadows, hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure. Even if we get rid of what to many minds is the objectionable word “hell” in its common meaning, yet the place that does enlarge itself is the under-space; it is the sphere of the pit; it is the realm of nightly shadows. How graphic the suggestion that sin is so multiplying on the surface of the earth that all the under-world must enlarge itself to accommodate the thronging and multiplying populations that eat the bread of dishonesty and drink distilled damnation! Think of the process in its whole operation; imagine some spectral voice saying, The evil under-world rulers expect a thousand more

men in by the end of the month. Or, Ere the year closes you will need to redouble your accommodation, for the world gets madder : evil is on the steps of the throne, evil is in the house of beggary, the aristocracy are corrupted through and through, and all the original space leading to Hadean places will be crowded, and men will be hurrying down in thousands, as if urged on by the whip of a cruel destiny; be ready! That is the image of the text. All glory and pomp shall be swallowed up. There is a spirit of doom in the universe. Bless God! Tell the devil-ridden aristocrat that he can do what he likes, that he will die with his own dog, and may be buried in the same ditch, and you do but heat his already fevered blood, and take out of his voice the last token of fair manliness. Tell the whole world that the spirit of judgment rules, and that at the end all illgotten property, glory, pomp, is eternal darkness, and you may touch a wholesome fear. It may be the meanest of all appeals that addresses itself to terror, yet so constituted is the human mind that the ministry of fear will always occupy an important position in the education of the world.

Then comes the time of restoration and vindication :—

“But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat” (vers. 16, 17).

A beautiful pastoral image! We have seen how the great owners proceeded in their acquisition of land more and more until they excluded the small proprietors; but now the time has come when the lambs shall feed after their manner. All the park walls shall be torn down, and all the land that was enclosed for the purpose of hunting game shall be thrown open, and all the little lambs shall feed as they used to do when every little flock-master had his patch of grass for his little pastoral family: the gilt-headed palings shall be torn up and cast into the furnace; and all the walls that shut out the poor so that they could not see a little green grass or a few flowers shall be shaken from beneath—not their topstones thrown down, but their foundations heaved up, and the earth shall cast them off as a nuisance, an incubus intolerable; and the landlords shall get back again all

their pastoral lands : Palestine shall yet be the land of the people. God is the great Landlord ; the earth is the Lord's, and we hold rightly what we hold as his gift ; what he has given us we may accept and cultivate, and make it right beautiful for him, and when the harvest smiles in its golden abundance let us give the first sheaf to him, saying, The first-fruits be thine, thou Giver of the bread of man ; then shall the earth yield her increase, then shall the spade hardly leave the soil it has tilled until the answering ground blushes with flowers or enriches itself with an abundance of wheat.

The evil-doers shall not be changed ; they will go on, drawing iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope. The idea is that men harness themselves to sin, and drag the black chariot after them with madness. May we know nothing of this but as a historical picture !

Then the prophet denounces those who are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength mingle strong drink. There are bad heroisms. We talk of men being heroic : what in ? Read :—

“Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink” (ver. 22).

They are strong men, they have an abundance of faculty, they are the devil's heroes, they do not things with half-heart or with reluctant hands ; when they drink they drink like strong men, and when they fall they fall with a thud upon the resounding earth—giants have fallen ; mighty men have lost their standing. Oh, pitiful thought, that we may be great in sin, great in wickedness, prime ministers of perdition, leaders and captains in hosts of darkness ; better be the least in the kingdom of heaven. That is honour ; that is a blessed immortality.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, thou art glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. We hear the voice of thy Son saying unto us, Be ye holy, as your Father in heaven is holy: without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Who can work in us this miracle of purity but thyself, thou mighty One, whose left hand is as his right, and whose hands are filled with omnipotence? Thou canst make us pure, for thou hast the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, and whatsoever we need for our sanctification thou hast at thy disposal. Holy Spirit, baptize us as with fire; Holy Ghost, descend upon us as in the pentecostal hour. See how far we lag behind, how much we need that we might have had: we have neglected our opportunities; we have sinned away even to the closing moment, the day of mercy; yet whilst light lingers in the western sky there is surely time to repent and return, and cry unto the Lord for his mercy, and put our trust in the Cross. Hear us when we pray; hear us when we ask for pity; hear us and answer us when our cry is for pardon. There is pardon at the Cross; its great name is written in blood; it stands above all other superscriptions, traced by the finger of God. Help us to forsake our way and our thought, wicked and unrighteous, and to return unto the Lord with open face, and eyes beaming with expectation though stained with tears; then shall we receive an abundance of pardon, like wave upon wave rolling in upon the shore. Wherein we have been pardoned, and have entered into the mystery of the better and upper life, may we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in all saintliness and strength of character, that we may be like the Saviour in our degree. May we remember what the fruits of the Spirit are, and renouncing all vanity, self-conceit, pride, and personal assurance, as if we could do anything by our own might, may we strive to bring forth those blessed fruits, and thus make the Lord of the vineyard glad. But the east wind is so blighting, the cold nights are so long, and the destroyer is so wakeful and so pitiless, that oftentimes the blossom is broken off, and our best aspirations never come to fruitfulness. But thou knowest all the tale of human strife and human evolution and human progress, and if thou dost hear our sigh for a better life, a wider and nobler existence, that sigh thou wilt regard as victory; thou wilt hear us and answer us, and some night even, or at the crowing of the cock, thou wilt come, and on us there will rest the unconsuming flame of Christ's own glory. In this hope we live; in this hope no man can ever die. Amen.

Chapter vi. 1-8.

"In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me."

LESSONS OF A VISION.

WE have seen how wrathful Isaiah was with the oppressions and iniquities of his day. The death of Uzziah probably coincided with the year of jubilee, and therefore brought out more vividly than was otherwise possible the state under which the people groaned and mourned, a state which elicited the maledictions which we have already studied. The prophet's mind is still upon the year when King Uzziah died. A great gap was created in history. It was time that the prophet saw something to cheer him. He had been looking at the earth, and all was vile; iniquity had filled up her measure to the brim. The people were groaning under the heel of the oppressor; the small freeholders had been driven into slavery, as we have just seen. It was in that darkness that Isaiah began to feel that he had eyes within, the vision of the heart, the sight of the soul. God's opportunity is often created out of our extremity. The prophet would have died of the grief of wounded patriotism if something had not occurred to lift him up into a new state of mind, and a keener realisation of the broadest facts of the universe. As a statesman and a patriot he had been wounded to the heart. The Lord will now come to him through a vision, through his higher imagination, through those wondrous sensibilities which set us at an infinite distance apart from the noblest beast of the earth or

finest bird that seeks the gate of the sun. It is well to have amongst us some seeing men. We are tired of earth's bleak monotony: the days are so much alike; the wheel goes round and round so regularly as to weary us by its very punctuality. Is there nothing but what we see with the eyes of the body? is this the sum-total of things? that sky, now so beautiful, now so thunder-laden; and this earth, so green, so wild, so beautiful, presenting a thousand phases, according to the process of the sun,—is this all? Then there come to us prophets who live a hard life amongst us. The prophet cannot have an easy life: he does not belong to the country; he does not belong to the time in which he lives; he has little or nothing to do with the present, and the future is so far away, and the market-place spirit of the world is so material, that the prophet has laughter for his applause, and pity or contempt for his reward. Still he lives, and he must speak as long as he lives; and some men receive him with gratitude; occasionally they pay visits to him by night and say, Rabbi, what seest thou? anything new in the fields above? any new voice spoken to thee lately? Come, tell us the whole tale, for really and truly, though we dare not confess it in public speech, we are sick at heart, and we are dying under the burden of weariness. What seest thou? is there anything more to be seen than these blear-eyed lamps that skirt the sluggish river of time? what hast thou seen? The prophet in this instance answers: I will tell thee what I have seen: I have seen the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Have you seen that? Yes. Do you affirm that vision? I do. Then that circumstance cannot be overlooked in any true psychology. There it is: you saw it, or you thought you saw it; so be it, in the meantime; but there it is: what is possible to the imagination may be possible to the realisation of human experience. What you have imagined may one day come to pass. I will not sneer at thee, O prophet, but listen to thee: come, tell me all thy tale, for I have a spirit of discernment, a spirit of criticism common to man, and in troth I will find thee out if thou art trying to impose upon me with some poor necromancy. What was the vision—noble or mean, useful or merely sentimental? State the terms: come within the sphere of rational judgment.

Let us look at Isaiah's vision, and in doing so let us mark first the intellectual sublimity of the text :—

"I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne" (ver. 1).

So far there is nothing to find fault with. The Lord is always upon a throne, even when he is nailed to the Cross ; this Lord and his throne are inseparable. There are dignitaries that have to study how to keep their thrones, but the Lord and his throne are one. "His train filled the temple": the glory-cloud filled all high places—I saw the Lord in vivid representation, in perfect outline of figure; I saw him in his majesty. If a man can persuade himself that he has done so, then by so much he elevates the whole level of his character. To have had such a dream is to enter upon to-morrow with a new spirit, if the dreamer be a wise man, sound in judgment and resolute in will. I saw more than the Lord: the Lord is not solitary in his heavens: I saw the seraphim—the celestial salamanders, standing in the midst of fire, without the smell of fire having passed upon them. We do not know what the seraphim are, but our point is that here is a man who has seen new beings. That is an exciting, and in the issue may become an ennobling, thought. We have seen nothing but men; yea, when we have sought to image the Eternal we have thought of a glorified man: our anthropology has been the base of our theology. Here is a man who says there are other beings than men, and brighter beings; wondrous creatures, but still creatures, waiting, listening, learning, obeying. To know this fills us with ardent desire to have a similar vision. Then comes the promise that one day we shall know even as also we are known; this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality, and in our resurrection state we shall have the companionship of beings wondrous in form, capacity, power to serve. There is something beyond. Tell us about these burning ones! Each had six wings; with twain he covered his face, for the glory would have blinded him but for his sheltering wings; with twain he covered his feet, he had a sense of imperfection, inferiority, littleness; with twain he did fly, he was delivered from the prison of our limitation, and the whole space of heaven seemed to be the field in which he could fly—the burning seraph, the swift messenger of God. If Isaiah

imagined this, we thank him for the imagination ; it ennobles us whilst we think of it. That there are other beings, greater, more capable, more variously gifted, is a thought which lures us upward, and moves with holy excitement our best spiritual ambition. But we could not rest here. To imagination something must be added to give it solid value. What conception do the seraphim form of God ? They have known him a long time—for centuries, æons, millenniums innumerable,—what say they about him when they speak or sing or worship ? “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts.” Imagination ceases there, and we feel that we are on solid ground. There is character behind the glory. The glory itself is nothing except as it expresses moral attributes, sound character, reality of justice, righteousness, and love. This testimony is not to be overlooked in estimating what we understand to be the doctrine of providence, redemption, and retribution. Then see how the whole picture rounds itself into superbness, completeness of significance. We have to deal with glory—an undefinable term ; with a great cloud—a revelation by concealment : quite a mystery in words, but a known and intelligible reality in consciousness. Then after glory and cloud we find worship ; and the worship is associated with music ; and all the glory, and all the concealing and revealing cloud, and all the worship, and all the music we find directed to one object of adoration—“the Lord of hosts.” So far the vision reveals great intellectual sublimity ; the conception is only possible to a strong mind. We might risk the intellectual reputation of Isaiah even upon this portion of the vision.

Let us look, in the second place, at the personal effect of what Isaiah saw :—

“Then said I, Woe is me ! for I am undone ; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips : for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts ” (ver. 5).

So the prophet does not come away triumphing in what he has seen ; he does not hold the vision as a prize, and mock other men because they have not seen similar revelations ; he says in effect : If ever you see God you will fall down in humility, self-abhorrence, and self-helplessness : “Then said I, Woe is me ! for I am undone.” He was self-convicted. Not a word of accusation

is reported as having been addressed to the prophet. Up to this point he has done nothing but behold, look upon, and stand in amazement before the great vision; there is no report of any one having whispered in his ear, Thou art a bad man, O Isaiah; thou art a sinner, and this vision is sent to judge thee, and fill thee with a sense of condemnation and shame. Nothing of the kind. To see God is to hate all sin; to see God is to be reminded of sin; to see the universe aright is to tremble. Who has ever had right clear vision of the whole sphere of things, its vastness, its order, its pomp, its solemnity, its obedience? If we could see all the worlds, and watch the way of their revolution and palpitation, we should be filled with shame, saying, Only man is vile: man does not show forth the glory of his Maker in this way; man's worship at the best is marked by spasm, irregularity, incompleteness; but see these great worlds, "For ever singing as they shine, The hand that made us is divine." If we could see our own little earth aright, in all its portions and sections, we should feel that we were unworthy of a place upon it, and that we should stain it by having our grave dug in it. How beauteous its flowers, how regular its swing around the sun, how obedient, how motherlike, how gentle, how willing to house us and screen us, and find roots for our hunger and fountains for our thirst! Oh could we but see thee, poor little sin-stained earth, in all thine industry and obedience, we should hate our own negligence and rebellion! To see God aright is to feel self-condemnation. We need no preaching, or exhortation, or recrimination, or words of charge and indictment. The prophet gives a right reason when he says: "For mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." If you would know whether this or that is pure, do not analyse it, but put side by side with it something about whose purity there is no doubt. If you are wondering as to the correct colour of this or that object, you will make nothing out by mere words; put by its side some thing about whose correctness of colour there is no debate, and the issue is already assured. Comparing ourselves with ourselves we become wise, and respectable even, and pride ourselves upon our respectableness: one man is honest as against another's dishonesty; one man is honourable as against another man's villainy. So we have classified society into respectable and

non-respectable, into good and bad, into clean-handed and foul-handed, and in our little mutual criticisms and our small emulous moralities we have become filled with a spirit of conceit and complacency. What we have to do is to seek a vision of God, to cease all merely mutual comparison and criticism, and to ask to see the King, the Lord of hosts; and one sight of his ineffable purity fills us with burning shame, and causes the proud head to fall upon the sobbing breast, and the whole man to collapse in self-impeachment. Do not let us look at one another for the purpose of forming a character for ourselves for relative respectability; judge everything by the standard of the sanctuary and by the balances of the altar.

What effect had the vision upon Isaiah? Look at its moral inspiration:—

“Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar” (ver. 6).

Then the seraph did not come in his own personality alone; he did not say, I can remove all the impurity of which thou dost complain; it lies within my power to make thee a good man? No such speech did he make. It is not in mortal to purify mortality. This help that we need is supernatural aid. Even a seraph cannot redeem, purify, or forgive. But the seraph instantly answered the cry, which was implied rather than expressed, for purification. When was a prayer for holiness long neglected? When a man has really felt the burden of sin, how long has God kept him waiting, groaning, and suffering under the intolerable pressure? They are all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be the heirs of salvation. The twelve legions of angels are always near at hand to help those who need supernatural help. The angel was not far off when the devil left the Saviour; hardly had the tempter gone until “angels came and ministered unto him.” About this angel-life we know little; we can know but little whilst we are in the body; but what little we do know helps us to believe that we are assisted, directed, by messengers, sent from the living One and by the living One to do us good in this weary difficult pilgrimage of life. Who shall say when they come, when they go? who knows what relation the spirits of those who have left us sustain

to us now in all this earthly toil and discipline? There we can but wonder, sometimes we dream, sometimes we hope, sometimes we think we see a hand others cannot see, and hear a voice they cannot hear. If what we do feel in this direction tends towards purification, enrichment, it is no phantasmagoria. Invite it to come again, and next time have the door of the heart wide open; for any vision that tends to purification is God's vision, and it should be received with glowing thankfulness.

Was there any practical purpose to be served by this vision beyond what has already been seen? The answer is found in the text, notably in the eighth verse:—

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”

Then the vision was no phantasm; it was not an exercise of a diseased imagination; it led to the consecration of life, to the settlement of a divine purpose, to the warming of the heart into sympathetic obedience towards all things divine, and therefore largely human. It has ever been so along the Biblical line: when men have had an interview with God they have been prepared to risk anything and everything in his strength and grace. It is because we have not seen God that we do not serve him; it is because we have had no transporting, transforming vision that when we are asked to work in the Church we tell lies, we grieve the Spirit with mocking excuses. Oh, lying Christian nominalist! thou art a sevenfold liar; thou dost not lie unto men, but unto God. There is no excuse for idleness, for illiberality, for littleness, for mean criticism; if you had seen God you would have been purified, and if you had been purified you could not rest without saying to God, Send me anywhere, and send me now. When Moses had seen the Lord he said, Make use of me as thou wilt; when Peter had seen the Lord he said, O Lord, I am a sinful man: I hate myself, but I will do what I can to serve thy will; when Paul had seen the vision he was stunned by it, blinded by it, but he came out of it; and who could stop that fire or quench its sacred burning? Call these mental actions dreams that lead to no sacrifice; say you have had grievous nightmare, if your churchgoing ends but in censoriousness and worldliness, and in enlarged audacity to tell

lies and do iniquity. Then I care not if you have dreamed with a Bunyan, and expressed yourself with a Shakespeare; it all goes for nothing if the issue be not purification and sacrifice. Bless God for any ecstasy that leads to self-immolation. If you come out of your trance saying, Here am I; send me,—send me to the worst neighbourhood, the poorest locality, the most difficult situation: I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts: do not deny me: let me go,—what you have seen has been no trance; you have had real communion, vital fellowship with the holy One.

Observe, by way of practical application, that God's holiness is never represented as a terror to men, but is always in holy Scripture set forth as an example, so to say, to be copied in daily and precise imitation. The holiness of God is not meant to consume men, to drive them into despair, to fill them with a spirit of dejection. Jesus Christ interprets God's holiness, and he brings it very near to us: he says, "Be ye holy as your Father in heaven is holy." In another case he is reported in other words, "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." So, then, we are not to understand by God's holiness an image of brightness that takes all heart out of us, because it is impossible to be so holy as the vision we have seen. God's holiness is meant to encourage us in the pursuit of holy character ourselves. His holiness is a proof that he will help us. What a sight to the living One to see some poor, sin-stained, sin-damned man trying to imitate the holiness divine! What oaths of consecration he utters! what resolutions every daybreak hears! what corrections are poured into the ear of listening eventide! Yet the man says, God helping me, I will be better to-morrow; I mean to be holy as God is holy, but I dare not utter the words aloud to myself, for their very utterance seems to spoil the pith of the vow, and to take the bloom off the consecration; but I know in my heart's heart that I have recorded a vow, that by the help of God I will never rest until I am clothed with the meekness of Christ, and filled with the holiness of God. Any book, any vision, any sermon, that points in that direction is sent of God, and is not to be turned aside as an idle dream or a vain appeal.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, all things are in thine hand, even the great and the small. Thou tellest the number of the stars, thou bindest up the broken in heart; thou takest up the nations into thine hand, and settest them down again as a little thing. Thy throne is on the circle of eternity, and thy sceptre is over all; thou rulest in blessedness: thy purpose is one of love; thou dost not desire the death of the wicked or the ruin of those who oppose thee; thy continual cry is, Turn ye, turn ye! why will ye die? Yet it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. As we read the history of the world, we say again and again with wonder and awe, Our God is a consuming fire. Clouds and darkness are round about thee, righteousness and judgment are the habitation of thy throne; no man can sin and live; no man can blaspheme against the heavens and live in peace and joy, for the Lord is against him, and all heaven is opposed to his progress. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked. This thou dost not say arbitrarily, as a threat of vengeance; thou dost make it known as a revelation, showing that wickedness always ends in turbulence, discontentment, pain, and hell. But if we confess our sins, then thou dost cast them behind thee; if we make full repentance for iniquity, we hear of it no more: the blood of Jesus Christ thy Son cleanseth from all sin: help us to bring our sins to the Cross, and to leave them there in an act of penitence and faith. Lord, save us, or we perish! God be merciful unto me a sinner! is the cry of every heart that knows itself. Thou wilt not listen to this cry without answering, and the answer of God to the cry of penitence is pardon, purity, and peace. Amen.

Isaiah vii., viii.

PANICS AND ANSWERS.

THESE chapters are, for popular purposes, practically sealed books. It would be difficult to say with definiteness what they mean. The instances referred to are all of high antiquity, and the immediate local reference would be of little interest to the majority of men, even if it could be determined specifically and finally. We must, therefore, study the two chapters with the view of discovering what we may that is applicable to our own experience, that falls into harmony with our own consciousness; and with a desire to apply what we may find with a strong

and fearless hand to all the necessities which may arise in our own lives and experience.

It is wonderful how amongst the most ancient writings we come ever and anon upon words which we seem to know—words which are quite modern in their meaning, and immediate in all their significance and application. For example, we have an instance (vii. 1) which fairly typifies the many threatenings which have been directed against the city of God. We hear of men, be their names what they may, who “went up toward Jerusalem to war against it, but could not prevail against it.” The sentence thus divides itself easily into the two parts which are always making themselves so obvious to our own inspection and perusal of history. The men went up to Jerusalem “to war against it.” Had the statement ended there we should have said, They were strong men, they were confederated men; they had studied the problem well from a military point of view, and no doubt Jerusalem was crushed by their oppressive hand. How many persons do really terminate a report at a comma, and say, Have you heard what an attack has been made upon Christian doctrine, upon the Christian Church, upon the very idea of God? But that is a poor report to give; the inquiry is wholly misleading. Yet how often the sentence terminates in the inquiry! A new book is issued which is supposed to be very able in its argument, and most copious in its references; and people say in alarm, Have you heard that another assault has been made upon a Christian stronghold? What of it? The stronghold is still there; the men who inhabit it are looking quietly out of the windows, and wondering at the poor fools who are bruising their hands against the eternal granite. State the whole case. What vital Christian doctrine has been successfully assailed? The most brilliant lectures have been directed against the theological Jerusalem; men of riotous genius and power of expression have come up to laugh at God's Jerusalem; but that must not be the whole statement which we make. Continue the verse as we find it, and we shall read, “but could not prevail against it.” Now we have a complete history. And this exactly represents the whole course of assault as directed against the Jerusalem of truth. This must be always so. “We can do

nothing against the truth, but for the truth": clever arguments, witty retorts, brilliant repartees, criticisms that dazzle by their brightness and exasperate by their acerbity, come and go, and Jerusalem stands, sunlit, fair, invincible.

Then, proceeding to the second verse, we have an instance of the many panics into which the city of God has been needlessly thrown. When the news was told to the house of David, saying, Syria leans upon Ephraim, or Syria is confederated with Ephraim, the two are one, the heart of Ahaz "was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind." And yet the true Davidic spirit that was within Jerusalem felt no flutter of panic. The Spirit of the indwelling God is not represented even by the men who inhabit Jerusalem: they are of the flesh, their days are a handful, they are quailing under great infirmity, they are disturbed by something within themselves, and all this concurring with an outward untowardness of circumstance, eventuates in panic, in heart-fluttering, in heart-melting, so that even strong men say, Alas! what shall we do in face of this tremendous confederacy? God is the keeper of Jerusalem. The battle is not yours, but God's. It is sad indeed when standard-bearers faint, and when those who keep look-out from the city towers begin to announce what they see in a voice of trembling, as if their hearts had been smitten with dismay; but God is King in Zion, the Lord reigneth; these men themselves are better than their fears; when they come really to reflect upon all the circumstances, they will say, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea": the panic is for a moment, the fluttering is a passing spasm; but the faith—the deep, solemn, living confidence—asserts itself in the long-run, and there is great quietness even though Rezin and Pekah thunder at the gates of the city. It is pitiful to see how many men give way under panic. There is only need to publish a book of blatant heterodoxy, and some persons will begin to fear that the ark of the Lord has been taken, and that the altar has been torn down stone by stone, so that not even the foundation is left. Such people have no true grasp of God; they have never known

the mysterious joy of identification with God, such as is suggested by the words: We live, and move, and have our being in God. The Church, in her true conception of election and vocation, can be no more troubled than God himself can be distressed. When she detaches herself from the sovereignty of God, and looks upon herself as a merely human institution, subsisting upon covenants that are frangible and that admit of many different interpretations, she will be the sport of every wind, the laughing-stock of every new folly; but when the Church says, I am in God, I live in God, without him I have no life, I can do nothing of myself, I am as the branch in the living vine, I look to God,—then she can no more be disconcerted, driven back, and ruined, than the eternal throne can shake because of the little winds that scourge themselves into gales, and disturb the brickwork of our common civilisation. Do we live in God? Are we enclosed with him in his sanctuary? Are the everlasting arms around us?

Then, proceeding further, we find an instance in which the only comforting answer could come from God (vii. 3-9):—

"Then said the Lord unto Isaiah, Go forth now to meet Ahaz, thou, and Shear-jashub thy son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field; and say unto him, Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted for the two tails of these smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin with Syria, and of the son of Remaliah. Because Syria, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah, have taken evil counsel against thee, saying, Let us go up against Judah, and vex it, and let us make a breach therein for us, and set a king in the midst of it, even the son of Tabeal: thus saith the Lord God, It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin; and within threescore and five years shall Ephraim be broken, that it be not a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is Remaliah's son. If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established."

There is a point in human history at which God comes in, takes up the whole occasion, and rules it himself, saying, as it were, with ineffable gentleness, You cannot imagine this; a business so complicated is too hard for you; stand back, I will undertake for thee, O threatened Zion. So, "Then said the Lord unto Isaiah——" There is always some man to send, some man of purged lips, some man fire-touched, who will face the occasion under the inspiration and comfort of the Paraclete. Here, as

ever, human ministry is employed to carry out divine purposes. Then here is a man sent of God so confident that he becomes contemptuous of the opposition. Isaiah said unto the king: "Be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted for the two tails of these smoking firebrands." The figure is that of two torches that have been burned down to the root, and nothing is left of them but smoke; the fire is nearly out, and a little wreath of smoke expresses the strength of these two firebrands. The contempt which Righteousness can assume is a terrible sarcasm. When Judgment laughs, the laugh is spectral and heartshaking; it sends a sense of dismay into the innermost parts of the spirit: when God laughs at our calamity, our calamity is multiplied by infinity.

"... for the fierce anger of Rezin with Syria, and of the son of Remaliah." Here is another touch of irony or scorn. Why was Pekah not mentioned by name? Because he was an upstart, an adventurer, a man who had no right to the throne; therefore he is shaken off the prophet's hand as "the son of Remaliah." Contempt of this kind is common in the Holy Scriptures: Saul is sometimes spoken of as "the son of Kish"; David himself was spoken of sometimes unrighteously and cruelly simply as "the son of Jesse"; and now Pekah is not even mentioned by name, some ancestor is brought up to lend him a moment's respectability, and he is spat upon under his father's name. God will have those in derision who set their shoulders against his throne for the purpose of overturning it. An awful expression is that—"The Lord shall have them in derision"; he will say to them, Do your utmost: let me see your fine writhing; show me the trick of your white agony; what can you do against the Eternal? Then will he laugh, and they cannot answer; he will deride, and they shall be burned by the heat of his scorn.

Then there is a divine counterblast—"It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass" (vii. 7). That is the word upon which the Church relies. The Church does not expect to meet those who oppose it in the strength of her own genius, or because of the abundance and exactness of her own erudition; she hands the case over to God; she says, The heathen have raged, and the people have imagined a vain thing: send thou thy reply from the

sanctuary ; yea, answer them out of Zion. When we say, "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh see it together," we must continue, and say, "for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." We are living upon a divine assurance, standing upon a divine promise ; if we are deceived, we have been deceived by the name of God ; we have not yielded to some cunningly-devised fable ; our humanity has been victimised by the false use of the only glorious Name. But until that has been proved, we abide in the covenant ; we refer to the letter and to the testimony, and our proofs are a thousand strong to every enemy that assails Jerusalem.

Ahaz, however, was a mixed character. He has been convicted in history of being an idolater as well as a professor of the true religion. He was therefore the representative of double-mindedness, a halting between two opinions, that double-mindedness which is unstable, and which cannot excel. Probably Isaiah, marking the workings of his countenance under the delivery of this communication, saw signs of fear, doubt, hesitancy : the king did not spring at the word with access of energy and with the confidence of inspiration ; so the prophet, quick to detect all facial signs, blessed with the insight that follows the spirit in all its withdrawment, said instantly, "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established." God works through human faith. The Saviour himself said again and again, "What wilt thou ?" "Believest thou that I am able to do this ?" Miracles are not thrown away upon unbelief, or are not worked for the purpose of gratifying curiosity ; they are the answers to faith : if the age of miracles has ceased it is because the age of faith has vanished. Isaiah thus delivered his prophecy and acquitted his conscience. This is, indeed, all that men can sometimes do. The preacher must retire from his position with a cold heart, saying, My only solace is that I have delivered thy word ; as for its music, it has been lost upon deaf ears ; the dead have not heard it, and the living have been as dead men.

This is all generic, common to human history in some form or relation ; now let us notice two or three remarkable expressions that probably occur nowhere else but in connection with this period of Biblical antiquity.

In verse 14 there is one announced whose name is to be called "Immanuel." The prophets made history by anticipating it; they projected themselves across the centuries and sunned themselves in the dawn of a new day. It would be altogether forcing the immediate prophecy beyond its meaning if we considered that Isaiah saw nothing but the day of Christ looming in the distant future. There have always been men in society who have represented the coming One—shall we say, sub-Christ; Christs in type, symbol, shadow; peculiarly-minded men, partly of earth, mainly of heaven; mysterious men, who have had power of prayer, who have worsted angels in the night-time, and wrung from them victories expressed in new names and larger titles; singular, eccentric men, not to be enumerated with others or classified in plurals; solitary men. One of these Isaiah saw. It might have been his own son. But the larger meaning is only to be found in Christ. The article itself is definite; we are entitled to read—not, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive," but—"Behold, the virgin shall conceive,"—the Virgin Mother: the beginning of a new history; the second Adam; the larger Paradise never to be forfeited. All these ideas in some form or under some colour are in the passage, though its immediate meaning must not be unduly forced.

Then, according to vii. 18, "the Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt." The hosts of Egypt were represented by the flies which all but darkened the air of that country at times, and the Lord should blow upon them—make a kind of whistling noise in their ears. ". . . And for the bee that is in the land of Assyria"—the innumerable bees that swarm in the forests and on the hills of Assyria: the Lord should whistle, or make a sibilant sound, as if calling the bees away to swarm elsewhere. He would not lift up his hand to smite: a hiss, a sibilance, a whisper—behold, they have all fled! Commit thy way unto the Lord; let him treat your enemies: though an host should encamp against thee, in this be confident, that God is on thy side; that his word is, "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper." "When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." Live in that confidence, and when Egypt and Assyria come as

swarming flies and innumerable bees, God will make a sound in his heaven that will alarm them, or withdraw them, or cause them to die of fear.

More than this :—

"In the same day shall the Lord shave with a razor that is hired" (vii. 20).

Ahaz thought by paying tribute to Assyria he was hiring an ally; the Lord said, You are not by your tribute engaging an ally, you are hiring a razor, and that razor shall shave you from head to foot, yea it shall not spare the beard; and to touch with a razor the beard of the Oriental was to consummate all outrage, was to render reconciliation impossible. Have we not sometimes thought we were hiring allies when we have only been hiring a razor? Can Israel have dealings with the uncongenial, the unfraternal, the spiritually alien, without suffering for the false contact, the vicious alliance, at some time or in some way? You thought you were buying an ally when you were only hiring a razor by which you were to be rendered naked and made contemptible.

More—

"It shall come to pass in that day, that a man shall nourish a young cow, and two sheep" (vii. 21).

Two ewes and a heifer shall be the property of him who was once a flockmaster! He who had a thousand heifers, and ewes without number, shall have to number his property as "a young cow and two sheep."

More! The irony grows :—

"And it shall come to pass, for the abundance of milk that they shall give he shall eat butter: for butter and honey shall every one eat that is left in the land" (vii. 22).

So does God make our poverty an irony. Our flocks shall be reduced, and yet so miserable shall be the general state of affairs that to have two ewes and one heifer will be to have plenty of milk and plenty of butter. How the Lord can change the face of society!

More still :—

"And it shall come to pass in that day, that every place shall be, where there were a thousand vines at a thousand silverlings, it shall even be for briars and thorns" (vii. 23).

The vines were so abundant that men had scarcely to be at the

trouble of gathering the fruit which was grown; they had but to put out their hands to fill them; and the time shall come when a thousand vines shall be for a thousand silverlings, and the vineyard shall be knotted, and entangled, and debased by briars and thorns; the ground once so fruitful shall be taken possession of by the meanest growths, and they shall so entwine themselves into the ground and into one another that ploughing shall be rendered impossible, and the fruitful hill shall be as a heap of stones! "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." "I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not; yea, I sought him, but he could not be found." When thou, O Lord, dost arise to shake terribly the earth, what are our vines against thine anger? and as for our flocks, do they not fly before God's thunder? Our only riches are spiritual; our only confidence is moral; if we are right with God, then we shall be right with nature, and our joy shall be full, because we have accepted the reconciliation which has been wrought out for us by the Son of God.

Still the promise lies in the distance :—

"Moreover the Lord said unto me, Take thee a great roll, and write in it with a man's pen concerning Maher-shalal-hash-baz" (viii. 1).

Write it in no minute microscopical hand which only the learned can read, but take plenty of parchment, let the scroll be broad, and take up a workman's pencil, broad at the point, and write, "Maher-shalal-hash-baz," big enough that almost the blind can see it. God hath large print in some of his books. Verily, he can write a small hand too, which men only can see through the microscope of tears. Sometimes the Lord's judgments are "abroad" in the earth, and sometimes they work with subtlety that cannot be valued by human criticism. What does Maher-shalal-hash-baz mean? Speed-plunder, haste-spoil: the man shall arise who will do God's judgments, and do them with earnestness, alacrity, precision, completeness. How the prophet lives in the future! There is always a Child to be born who will advance the kingdom of God. Do not believe that the ages have seen their greatest birth. Even Jesus Christ when he went away said: If I go away, I will send a Comforter, even the

Paraclete, who shall abide with you for ever. The greatest births will be found by-and-by to be spiritual births—new conceptions of God; new in the sense of being larger, juster, more pregnant with joy and promise. Christianity has to deal with the future. The Lord Jesus Christ made but few references to the past, but he did make some, and they were distinct and solid; but his eyes were set towards the coming Sun, the coming Kingdom, his own return, not as a man that could be seen, but as an inspiration and a sovereignty felt in every mind and heart, and owned by all who should come under its gracious and redeeming and sanctifying touch. But if we refuse we shall have to answer for it in judgment:—

“Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah's son; now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels and go over all his banks: and he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel” (viii. 6-8).

The choice is with ourselves. If we refuse gracious ministries we must encounter judicial judgment; if we will not allow the goodness of God to lead us to repentance, we must accept the criticism of God in anger, and yet in holy justice; if we cannot be lured we shall be driven; if we will not fall upon the stone and be broken, the stone will fall upon us and grind us to powder. God first tries gentle ministries, kind words, and loving speeches, entreating, importuning gospels; but there will come a time when his Spirit will no longer strive with men—then cometh the judgment; and then human speech had better halt, for it has no words worthy of that visitation.

Then comes the grand appeal:—

“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (viii. 20).

A very singular expression this. The reference is not to some written book, as is generally supposed; the passage is often quoted as an authority for resting everything upon Scripture; there is no doubt that the words may be used in that sense by express accommodation, but not by literal criticism. The appeal is to the law and to the testimony written in our own hearts by

the finger of God : let conscience speak ; let reason, unprejudiced and unperturbed, utter her voice ; let human consciousness be a divine witness. How this enlarges the scope of God's claim upon mankind ! Not only is there a Book written with pen and ink, which we delight to believe to be the work of inspiration, but there is a book written within the human heart, upon the human heart. Even the heathen are a law unto themselves. God hath not left himself without witness in any land. This is the appeal which the Christian minister must make to all people in all countries, namely, Let your hearts speak ; let your innermost, uppermost reason utter its verdict ; be solemn, be true to your own best instincts, and answer this appeal from the Book of God. The image is beautiful, yea, exquisite. The Book speaks broadly and lovingly ; and having ceased it would seem to wait for human consciousness, as expressed in conscience, reason, judgment, experience, to give its verdict. Take the case of Jesus Christ. Some one asked him : " Master, which is the great commandment in the law ? " And he answered him ; and one in the crowd said, " Well, Master, thou hast said the truth ; for to love God and to love your neighbour is the whole law : " that is the voice, so to say, of independent judgment, reason, even of moral instinct. So the appeal must be addressed to every man's own innermost nature. Come, what say you ? Are you right ? or are you wrong ? Can you defend yourselves completely, and defy God to prove you to be wicked ? Or do your hearts condemn themselves ? Do you put your hand upon your mouth, and lay your head upon your sobbing breast, and say, The law of the Lord is right ; I am born in sin, and shapen in iniquity ; in sin my mother conceived me ; I am not righteous, no, not in one point : God be merciful to me, a sinner ? That would be the right answer to the divine appeal. Blessed is he who gives it, and works it out in practical piety !

Chapter ix. 1-7.

PHASES OF DIVINE PURPOSE.

THIS is confessedly a chapter most difficult of interpretation. It is evidently detached from some other chapter; the opening word suggests this; that opening word is "Nevertheless." Let us read the last verse of the preceding chapter:—

"And they shall look unto the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness" (viii. 22).

Observe in that verse the word "dimness." Now let us follow with the first verse of the ninth chapter:—

"Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations."

The idea is that the whole land of Israel had seen the extreme point of distress and desolation, and that hereafter the gloom was to disappear, and the full light would shine upon the very land which had been clouded with despair. The ablest translation of the first verse would seem to be this: "Surely there was no gloom to her that was afflicted. In the former time he brought shame on the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the latter he bringeth honour on the way by the sea, beyond Jordan, the circuit of the Gentiles." The Revised Version makes no substantial difference in the translation. "Zebulun"—what association have we with that word? We have read it somewhere. Was it not in the Gospels, whilst we were perusing the record of the life of Christ upon the earth? Zebulun and the land of Naphtali were the parts afterwards known as Upper and Lower Galilee. Under this designation we seem to know both localities familiarly. Was not Nazareth in Zebulun? and was not our Lord called a Nazarene? Who shall say that there are not mysteries in Providence—things we pass by at the time, but upon which we recur with larger delight, fuller intelligence, and

greater capacity of spiritual understanding? This is always occurring in the history of the world. Again and again we come upon such expressions as, "Then remembered they." For the time being the incident had lost recollection, it had quite departed from the memory; but some other incident arose which had a resurrectional effect upon the past: "When, therefore, he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them." So history is the interpreter of history; we must take the present as a lamp to hold over the far past. To-morrow will interpret a good deal of what has happened under the darkness of to-day. The land of Zebulun and of Naphtali was to be the focal point of divine wealth and blessing.

"The sea,"—what sea? The Bible is often elliptical in its references. It says "the river," as if every one knew what river was meant; as if there were but one great river rolling through the earth: it need not be named, surely some intelligence must be assumed on the part of the reader and the hearer. And now we read of "the sea": a wonderful sea; not large, but full of association, full of history,—the "sea" we have known from the beginning of our study, called the sea of Chinnereth in Numb. xxxiv. 11, the sea of Galilee and the sea of Tiberias in John vi. 1, and Gennesaret in Mark vi. 53. Names change, but the old waters roll in their old channels, not knowing that men are giving them fancy-names, battling about them, and determining great imperial and political rights by the banks within which they flow. Men have named the stars, and so singularly are we constituted that we find it sometimes difficult to dissociate the name from the planet; so we say, with a show of great learning and familiarity, That is Mars and that is Venus, and yonder solemn eye that seems to survey the whole field of night is Jupiter. We imagine that these stars will recognise their own names; whereas they would be as steady in their places, as faithful in their revolutions, if we took their names away and addressed them no more. The nightingale does not sing because we listen. A wondrous independence there is in nature,—an independence that sometimes affrights us, for we are accustomed to think ourselves of importance, and that the sun rises to hear the song of chanticleer. It is not so. Have not many truths had

fancy names given to them? If men have named rivers, and seas, and continents, and stars, may they not have named dogmas, principles, truths, philosophies, doctrines? and may we not have come to understand that the one is the other, and that if the name be interfered with, the planetary truth is disturbed on its throne? Oh that men were wise!

"As in the day of Midian" (ver. 4). What day was that? We have read about it, and we ought to know the reference. The victory of Gideon over the Midianites was one of the most conspicuous instances of valour and military success in all Biblical history, the record of which is to be found in Judges viii. 24-27. Great historical events should abide thus; old history should not be lost. Men make little phrases of this kind like refrains to a song—"As in the day of Midian." That is the right use of history. The God that enabled me to kill the lion and the bear will make this uncircumcised Philistine a child in my hands: the Lord that gave me victory in the day of Midian will enable me to set my foot upon the neck of every foe. Turn history into music; turn solemn memories into joyous inspirations, and thus make yesterday supply bread for to-day's hunger.

In verse 5 we read:—

"For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire."

It has been submitted that a better rendering is this: "Every boot of the warrior that tramps noisily and the cloak rolled in blood shall be for burning as fuel for fire." The soldier wears his tall boot, and as his foot comes down on the earth he makes it ring again; and hearing an army pass by who would suppose that the earth will survive the cruel tramp? Religious inspiration lifts men so high as to enable them to despise the pomp and circumstance of war; every boot of the warrior that tramps noisily, and the cloak rolled in blood, which men would gather up and preserve in museums, and show to admiring ages, shall be gathered up by the hand of time and thrust into the middle of the hottest fire. All such relics were made for burning. In our patriotic folly, our exuberant and intoxicated zeal, we gather the boots of warriors, and the cloaks of conquerors, and the tattered

banners of famous fields, and all but worship them : underneath the whole pile should be written, " These are for burning as fuel for fire."

Let us now, advancing from these points of criticism, look at some of the abiding doctrines and illustrations suggested by this noblest effort of the prophet's imagination. Isaiah's wing never takes a higher flight than it does in this prevision of the centuries. Observe, the divine purpose has never been satisfied, if we may so say, with darkness, judgment, desolation ; the Lord has never said, I have made an end of that wicked world, and now, having blotted it out of the firmament, I shall be at peace. Judgment is his strange work. He never turns aside from a crushed sinner, saying, There is the proof of my omnipotence ; I will return to that place : the sinner withers under my curse. Nothing of the kind ever occurs in the record of what we may call the divine experience. When God has judged a man he would seem to return to see what effect the judgment has had, if haply he may find some sign of awakening feeling of loyalty and filial submission. When God cuts down a tree he says, Perhaps it may sprout again ; the poor little offending shrub must have another chance. God delights not in judgment, destruction, punishment ; he has no pleasure in death. What, then, has been God's feeling ? It has been always a feeling of solicitude and yearning to bless the nations, saying, How can I surprise them with fuller light ? how can I amaze them with redundance of gladness ? I will dig about the tree and do what in me lies, to nurture it, and strengthen it, and culture it ; next year it may bear fruit. This is the spirit of the divine gospel ; this is the meaning of the whole plan of Providence. We shall do wrong if we suppose that pity comes in only with the historical Christ, that compassion was born on Christmas Day. Every deed of God in relation to man holds within itself the Cross and priesthood of Christ ; so far will we go in accepting all the mystery of evolution. Keeping within the circle which we know as the human circle, we are prepared to say that in every providence there is a Calvary, in every deed of love there is the beginning and pledge of an atonement, on the largest scale, involving the destiny of the race. Doth not the goodness of God lead you to repentance ? Destruction was easy :

restoration is the difficulty. It is nothing to perform a miracle of darkness. For that miracle God has but to withhold the sun. But how to keep the sun in his place; how to preserve the monotony of graciousness, the permanence of goodness; how to run the days into one another, so that at last they shall be a piece of tessellated mercy and compassion, a mosaic wrought by invisible fingers, and meant to impress the observer with a sense of design, wisdom, love,—that is the infinite difficulty. God has persevered, so to say, in this course—restoring men's souls, keeping the universe together, avoiding all sensationalism of phenomenon and of action, and so continuing things that men of an evil spirit have said, Where is the promise of his coming? for all things continue as they were; we see the heavens as the fathers saw them, and the earth is still in her place. So the perverse mind has turned the very permanence of divine goodness into an objection to the fulfilment of divine promises. Let us seize the solemn, central, eternal truth, that whatever God does in relation to this earth he does with a view to its recovery, its restoration, its reinstatement in the household of the stars.

The divine movement amongst the nations has always expressed itself under the contrast of light and darkness:—

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined” (ver. 2).

No contrast can be more striking; therefore this is the one God has chosen whereby to represent the divine movement: God is associated with light, and all evil is associated with darkness. What is light? Only those who have been long in darkness know what the morning is. It is nothing to those who go to rest healthily, and passing through a dreamless sleep, open their eyes to find that nature has been busy all the time, and that all things are to-day as they were yesterday. Men who sleep and rise so know nothing about the light. Could a man, who has been ten years blind, receive his sight, he would go almost mad with grateful joy as he beheld the light: for the light is everywhere; it is in the flower, it is in the air, it is in every human face; it is the mystery that works itself into the whole economy and relation of being; it is the secret of most

things, it is the interpreter of all : God is light. Only renewed men know what sin is. Whilst we are in the sin we do not know it ; we have wrought ourselves into a shameful familiarity with it, so that even sin, which ought to be the miracle of all time, becomes the commonplace of history. Let a man once see what sin really is, and escape from it by the grace of God, and he will tell you what he has passed through in language that will appear to be an exaggeration to men who have not had similar experience. Only those who have been the servants of evil can read such a book as Bunyan's "Grace Abounding," and can understand many of the ancient spiritual writers. The elder brother could not understand the feasting, the music, and the dancing ; he had always been at home ; his monotony was broken in upon : here is a miracle of joy, and he is not in the atmosphère ; he has no vital relation to all the process ; it is to him noise, tumult, folly, an act of gross misconception on the part of his father. The prodigal understood it all ; now he listened to the music with new attention ; now he joined in the dance, not as in the revel of debauchery, but as in a religious exercise ; the music might be the same, the whirl of the dance unchanged in any movement ; it is the spirit that transforms and elevates all the actions of life. Did we really know the meaning of this blessing of spiritual light we should be touched into music, as in the ancient fable the rising sun made the stones sing and quiver as with joy. Isaiah feels that all this is coming upon the earth ; he says in effect, This is the kingdom—who is the king ? The fulfilment of the divine purpose has ever been associated with incarnation, idealised humanity. There has always been some coming One. Sometimes we have almost seen him upon the historic page,—“A prophet shall the Lord your God raise 'up unto you,”—and instantly imagination is fired, and the whole sphere of human sensibility is excited to a new sensitiveness, as if the prophet might be coming to-day. Who is this king-priest, bearded, solemn-eyed, calm, majestic ? What is thy name, O thou father amongst men ? “My name is Melchizedek.”—Tell me thy name this dark night, thou wrestling angel ! But the name was not given ; only the suppliant's name was changed into larger meaning. Still, there is the spectral, the Melchizedek-type of the true Melchizedek ; a prophet that is

coming, "like unto me," yet unlike—a larger self, an idealised Moses. And then in the Psalms he hath promised his Son. Is there a Son, a Child? Then, again, "Kiss the Son." Where is he? Is he born? Does he live? Has any man seen him? "Melchizedek," "Prophet," "Angel," "Son,"—the meaning is that there is yet to be a birth in history, to-morrow or a thousand ages hence;—that all creation travails, groans, sighs, and in its sighing says, The right man has not yet come; he is coming. It was given to some men to see the day afar off. Isaiah said:—

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (ver. 6).

It is not necessary to suppose that the prophet knew the literal meaning of his own words. He is but a poor preacher who knows all that he has said in his sermon. Had Isaiah done so, he would be no longer the contemporary of his own epoch. It is the glory of prophecy to "feel after." It is the glory of science to say long before the planet is discovered, There is another world there: no telescope has seen it, no message of light has been received from it consciously, but keep your telescope in that direction, there must be a starry pulse just there. The botanist knows that if he finds a certain plant in a given locality there will be another plant of another name not a mile away. He judges from one plant to another; he submits himself to inferential logic: he has not seen that other plant, but he tells you in the morning that because yesternight he found this leaf growing not far from the house in which he resides he will find another leaf of a similar pattern, or a diverse pattern, not far away; and at night he comes home, radiant as the evening star, and says, Behold, I told you this morning what would be the case, and there it is. So with the larger astronomy, and the larger botany: there is another planet somewhere yonder; when it is discovered call it the Morning Star, and inasmuch as there is triacle, treacle, in Gilead—a balm there—there shall be found another plant not far away; when you find it call it by some sweet name, such as the Rose of Sharon, or the Lily of the Valley. It is the glory of the prophet to see signs which have infinite meanings—to see the harvest in the seed, the noonday

in the faintest tint of dawn, the mighty man in the helpless infant, the Socrates in the embryo. This prevision made the prophets seemingly mad. Their knowledge was to them but a prison, so small, so dark, yet now and again almost alive with a glory all but revealed. The horizon was loaded with gloom, yet here and there a rent showed that heaven was immediately behind, and might at any moment make the dark cold earth bright and warm with eternal summer. This hope has kept the world alive; this hope has kept off the languor and decrepitude of old age; this hope has shaken the prison-walls of the present, and filled the prospect with the image of good men, mighty to labour and to lead the world.

Look at the deliverer as seen by the prophet—"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called——" Now, the English punctuation seems to fritter away the dignity of the appellation. The compound name really falls into this classification: First, Wonderful-Counsellor, as one word, as if, indeed, it were but one syllable; second, God-the-Mighty-One, not four words, but hyphened together; third, Father-of-Eternity, also hyphened and consolidated; fourth, Prince-of-Peace, that likewise an instance of the words run into one another, and in this four-fold classification we have the mysterious name of the deliverer. There is no evidence that Isaiah saw the birth of Christ as we understand that term; but what he did see was that the only deliverer who could accomplish the necessary work must fill out the whole measure of these terms; if he failed to fill out that outline, he was not the predicted Messiah. Let us see. He must fill the imagination—"Wonderful." Imagination cannot be safely left out of any religion; it is that wondrous faculty that flies to great heights, and is not afraid of infinite breadths; the faculty, so to say, that lies at the back of all other faculties, sums them up, and then adds an element of its own, using the consolidated mind for the highest purposes of vision and understanding. Is this name given for the first time? Where do we find the word "Wonderful" in the Scriptures? We may not, perhaps, find it in the English tongue, but it is really to be found in Judges xiii. 18: "The angel of the Lord said unto Manoah,

Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?"—the same Hebrew word that is rendered in the text "Wonderful"; so we might read, "The angel of the Lord said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is Wonderful." Let us say again and again, there has always been a spectral presence in history, a ghost, an anonymous ministry; something that comes and goes in flashes of light, in frowns of darkness, in whispered blessings, in dreams that make the night glow above the brightness of a summer day.

Not only must he fill the imagination, he must satisfy the judgment. His name, therefore, is not only Wonderful, but "Counsellor," the fountain of wisdom and understanding, the mind that rules over all things with perfectness of mastery, that attests everything by the eternal meridian, and that looks for righteousness. Not only must he be Wonderful, and not only must he satisfy the judgment, he must also satisfy the religious instinct, so he is called "The Mighty God." It is not enough to describe God without epithetic terms. Sometimes we say, Why utter such words as, Thou infinite, eternal, ever-blessed God?—because we are so constituted in this infantile state of being that we need a ladder of adjectives to get up to our little conception of that which is inconceivable. You cannot limit "love" in its syntax. You can write grammars for pedants, but when the heart burns, when all love turns the heart to divinest uses, then we use redundancy of words, because we require all possible multiplications of terms in order to give but a dim hint of the rapture which makes our souls ecstatic.

Not only so, there must be in this man a sense of brotherhood, so he is called "The Prince of Peace." He will bring man to man, nation to nation; he will arbitrate amongst the empires of the earth and rule by the sabbatic spirit. Christianity is peace, and any man who resigns even the highest position in the nation, rather than show sympathy with unnecessary war, is a man who deserves the confidence and the honour of his countrymen by so much. If England would disarm herself she would go far towards disarming the earth. It is the heroic

Christian nation that is needed to lead the empires of the world. Whilst men are making but a dozen guns fewer this year than they made last year they are but playing with the problem of peace, trifling with the problem of philanthropy. When a nation, crowded with altars and churches, a nation that has almost made the Cross into an ornament, shall disarm her soldiers she will go, we repeat, far towards completing the disarmament of the world. It is vain to profess Christ and to keep up standing armies. The lie is given to our prayers when we discharge our guns, and even negatively challenge and defy our enemies.

He is to be more still. He is to be "The everlasting Father," otherwise translated, The Father of eternity; otherwise, and better translated, The Father of the age to come. Therein we have misinterpreted Christianity. We have been too anxious to understand the past. The pulpit has had a backward aspect—most careful about what happened in the second century, dying to know what Tertullian thought and what Constantine did. Christ is the Father of the age to come. If he lived now he would handle the question of poverty; he would discuss the great uses of Parliament; he would address himself to every church, chapel, and sanctuary in the kingdom; he would come into our various buildings and turn us out to a man. Christianity is the prophetic religion. It deals with the science that is to be, with the politics yet to be developed, with the commerce that is yet to be the bread-producing action of civilised life.

The surrounding nations Egypt and Assyria gave great names to their gods. Look at the inscriptions on the pillars in the time of Sargon. One Assyrian king was called "The Great King, The King Unrivalled; The Protector of the Just; The Noble Warrior." If Isaiah wrote in a time of great names he, by this conception of an appellation, threw all other cognomens into contempt. "The mighty God." The word is not *Elohim*, a word under which a species of sub-divinity could be classified: "Said I not unto you, Ye are gods?" That word is *El*, a word which is never applied but to Jehovah, and which is never used but as connoting the innermost essence of ineffable deity.

This is Isaiah's prophecy. The deliverer is to come as a child, a son, a governor, a name; he is to sit "upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever." Say there was a secondary application of the terms, there can be no objection to that; but no living man ever filled out in their uttermost ~~spherical~~ meaning all these names but one, and his name is JESUS.

Then comes rapture upon rapture. And the pledge of the fulfilment of all is, "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." The word rendered "zeal" is the root-word out of which comes the term *jealousy*; zeal and jealousy mean the same thing in this connection—The jealousy of the Lord of hosts will perform this. The Lord is jealous over the daughter of Zion; he is jealous over the integrity of his own oath. When he has declared that the whole earth shall be filled with a divine glory, not one iota of that promise can fail; the Lord's jealousy or zeal is involved in the fulfilment of the terms. The Lord worketh. If the conversion of the world were dependent upon our mechanical agencies, that conversion would be long delayed, it might, indeed, be expunged from any record of the possibilities; but the battle is not ours, it is God's; the banner that is to float from the heights of a conquered world is to be planted there by him whose name is King of kings, Lord of lords. Heaven takes a long time in its working, but its work is done for ever. We should wish to see the whole world at peace to-day, and we should love to run from tower to tower and tell the metal in every belfry to ring out the old and ring in the new, for the very Christ has come; but the matter is of greater consequence to Christ than it can be to us. It is well, therefore, for us if in faith and rest and love we can say, Lord, thy time is best: we will pray thine own prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."

Chapter ix.-x. 4.

THE KNELL OF DOOM.

THERE is a very striking expression in the eleventh verse of chapter ix.: "The Lord shall set up the adversaries." "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" Does God employ evil spirits, evil men? Is it true that he maketh the wrath of man to praise him, and that he restrains the remainder thereof, and keeps it back for use upon occasion? Does he use up the very hell which sin has made, turning its heat into uses intended for judgment and penalty, and through this process intended also for repentance and reclamation? It is a wonderful universe. "The Lord shall set up the adversaries." This accounts for many oppositions which otherwise would be without explanation. We wonder why such and such people should be opposed to us; on the face of the occasion there is nothing to account for the hostility; in fact, there may be possibly something which ought to operate in another direction, making them rather friends and comrades than enemies; yet there they are, in battle array, looking upon us jealously, speaking of us falsely, endeavouring to ensnare our steps, to frustrate our purposes, and to make our life a misery. Attempt to conciliate them, and all your approaches do but add to the malignity of their detestation. We are not to look upon these things as merely human, coming and going by an uncalculated law, an operation of chance or fortuity; we are to ask for discerning eyes that look beneath surfaces, and find the spring of causes. The people themselves, too, are at a loss to explain their hostility: they cannot give reasons in regular numeration, gathering themselves up into a final and representative reason; yet they know that their hearts are simply set against us in a deadly attitude. Ask them questions about this opposition, and they will confess themselves bewildered; they daily look round for causes, and

find none; yet they say they cannot restrain the dislike, and they must force it into forms of opposition about whose urgency and determinateness there can be no mistake. How is all this? Is it not the Lord reigning even here? God means to chasten us, to make us feel that there are other people in the world beside ourselves, and that we have no right to all the room, and no claim that can be maintained to all the property. Thus we teach one another by sometimes opposing one another. We are brought to chastening and sobriety and refinement by attritions and oppositions that are, from a human point of view, utterly unaccountable. The Bible never hesitates to trace the whole set and meaning of providence to the Lord himself: he sends the plague, the pestilence, the darkness, all the flies and frogs that desolated old Egypt; he still is the Author of gale, and flood, and famine, and pestilence. We have amused ourselves by deceiving ourselves, by discovering a thousand secondary causes, and seeking, piously or impiously, to relieve providence of the responsibility of the great epidemic. Within given limits all we say may be perfectly true; we are great in phenomena, we have a genius in the arrangement of detail; but, after all, above all, and beneath all, is the mysterious life, the omnipotence of God, the judgment between right and wrong that plays upon the universe as upon an obedient instrument,—now evoking from it black frowning thunder, and now making it tremble with music that children love, and that sweetest mothers want all their babes to hear. Who can be so gentle, so condescending, so tender as the everlasting Father?

In this section we come upon a word which may be regarded as a refrain—"For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still" (ix. 12). In the seventeenth verse the refrain is repeated; in the twenty-first verse we find it again; and once more (x. 4) the solemn words roll in upon our attention: "For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still." There must be some cause for this. Is the cause concealed? On the contrary, it is written in boldest capitals, so that the dimmest eyes may see it all, in every palpitating, burning syllable. Let us make ourselves acquainted with the cause, lest we judge God harshly by wondering that his

hand should be stretched out in judgment rather than stretched out that he may touch the nations with a sceptre of mercy.

"The people turneth not unto him that smiteth them" (ix. 13). That is one element of the cause of this judgment. They do not kiss the rod : they see it to be a rod only ; they do not understand that judgment is the severe aspect of mercy, and that without mercy there could be no real judgment. There might be condemnation, destruction, annihilation, but "judgment" is a combined or compound term, involving in all its rich music every possible utterance of law and grace and song and hope. Why do we not turn to him who smites us, and kiss the rod ; yea, kiss the hand that wields it ? Why do we not say, Thy judgments are true and righteous altogether, thou Lord most High : health gone, chairs vacated, fireside emptied ; all is right, and all is hard to bear : the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away ; blessed be the name of the Lord ? Yea, the submissive heart may go further, and say, I have no right to any tittle that has been taken from me ; it was really not mine ; the mistake was that I thought it belonged to me, and that I could establish a claim to its proprietorship and retention : whereas I see now that I have nothing that I have not received, that I never had anything that was not given to me or lent to me, or of which I was not put in trust and stewardship. Thou hast taken it all away ; I know it is not because I have prayed too much, but because I have sinned beyond measure. When a man thus kisses the hand that wields the rod, the rod blossoms, and God's judgment becomes God's grace.

"The leaders of this people cause them to err ; and they that are led of them are destroyed" (ix. 16).

That is another explanation of the cause. The displeasure is not superficial or incidental, involving only a few of the weaker sort of people ; the displeasure has attacked the very centres of social dignity, social thought, and social influence. The leaders have fallen : what can the followers do ? Howl, fir tree, for the cedar has fallen. In ancient times the people were accustomed to put the statues of their princes and leaders close to fountains and springing waters ; they thought the association good, the alliance seemed to be natural and suggestive : for these men were

fountains of pure water, springs of wisdom, and judgment, and righteousness; all their thought was clear as crystal, and the uprising of their life was as water that came from a rocky bed, untainted, refreshing. The idea was excellent. People who had such conceptions regarding their princes, leaders, and legislators were likely to yield themselves to whatever influence such mighty men exerted. When, therefore, the leader went astray, the whole procession followed him, because they had confidence in him. "I command, therefore," said one who spoke with authority, "that prayer be made for all men"—for princes, governors, rulers, magistrates, judges, ministers of state, conductors of the journals of the time; for all men who have the eloquent tongue, the facile pen, moral, intellectual, social, that leadership may be purified, and that under a sanctified directorate the whole nation may move on in the direction of righteousness, equity, love of truth, moral frankness, and abounding, yea boundless, charity.

"Every one is an hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaketh folly" (ix. 17).

This is a continuation of the explanation of the cause of the divine judgment. Mark the completeness of the statement: it is "every one." We have read elsewhere, "There is none righteous, no, not one." We are familiar with the expression that the Lord looked down from heaven to see if there were any that were righteous and that did good, and whose thoughts were towards himself in all the simplicity of trust and in all the ardour of prayer, and he himself, reporting upon the moral state of the world, said, They have all turned aside. In our high confessions, sometimes perhaps thoughtlessly, yet after a moment's reflection most thoughtfully, we have said, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way." "Every one is an hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaketh folly." Does not the word "folly" seem to be too weak a word with which to conclude that indictment? "Hypocrite," "evildoer," "folly"—does not the series run in the wrong direction? So it may appear in the translation, but the word for "folly" should be "blasphemy." "Every one is an hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaketh blasphemy:" the world has become brazen-faced in iniquity, shameless in sin; an oath shall now be

uttered where once it would only have been whispered, and men shall speak openly of forbidden things as if they were talking the conventional language of the day. The devil drives his scholars fast; he does not keep school for nothing; he means to turn out experts; he listens to our profane rhetoric, and in proportion as we become eloquent in the utterance of his language does he give us prize, and certificate, and honour, and write down our names in the list of those who have taken high positions in the examinations of hell. "For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still." That is right. If his anger had been turned away, he would not have been God; if his hand had not been stretched out, even farther and farther still in presence of such wickedness, then he would have forfeited his right to sit upon the throne of the universe. God cannot yield; righteousness can¹ never compound; there is no compromise in truth: the whole controversy must be settled upon principles that are fundamental, all-involving, and eternal, and then it will be for ever settled.

The Lord will show how the judgment will take effect—"Therefore the Lord will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush, in one day" (ix. 14). The explanation is given partly in verse 15, "The ancient and honourable, he is the head; and the prophet that teacheth lies, he is the tail." "Branch and rush"—the allusion is to the beauteous palm-tree: it shall be cut down notwithstanding its beauty; and the "rush"—the common growths round about it, entangled roots, poor miserable shrubs that crowd and cumber the earth—branch and rush cannot stand before God's sword and fire: everything that is wrong goes down in a common destruction. Judgment obliterates our classifications. When judgment begins at the house of God, the meanest man and the loftiest go for nothing before the fire of that holy wrath. It is well that now and again all our classifications should be destroyed. We have made too much of them; we have designated this and that as reputable and respectable and good, whereas it was only relatively such, and not really. When God arises to shake terribly the earth, tower, and temple, and town, and meanest hut, all reel under the tremendous shock. "God is no respecter of persons." He will not spare the corrupt

judge and punish the meaner criminals ; rather will he say, The greater the criminal's advantages the meaner is the criminal himself : he ought to have known better ; he had every opportunity of knowing better ; he sinned away his advantages, and therefore his downfall could be none to mitigate or deplore.

"The Lord shall have no joy in their young men" (ix. 17).

The meaning is full of suggestion. God delights in the young. God has made the young a ministry of instruction and comfort to old age. God keeps the world young by keeping children in it, and helpless ones. But God shall cease to see in young men any hope for the future. Once he would have done so, saying, The young men will keep the world right : they are strong, they are pure-minded, they are enthusiastic ; their youthful, sometimes exuberant, zeal and influence will keep things as they ought to be kept. But henceforth God withdraws from the young, and they become old ; he takes from them his all-vitalising and all-blessing smile, and they wither as flowers die when the sun turns away.

Sin was to be left to be its own punishment. Here we come upon a paragraph full of mournful interest. The whole work shall be left to sin itself. "No man shall spare his brother" (ix. 19). How often have we seen when men have fallen into wrong relations to God they have fallen also into wrong relations to one another ; all pledges are broken up, all covenants are destroyed, all understandings as to concession and compromise and give-and-take,—all these things disappear, and man flies at the throat of man like wild beast at wild beast. How man can sink ! Why can he sink so far ? Because he has risen so high : the inverted tree we see in the calm lake indicates the height of that tree as it lifts itself up towards the welcoming and blessing sun. "He shall eat on the left hand, and they shall not be satisfied" (ix. 20). This is the mockery of God. This is how God taunts men. "They shall eat every man the flesh of his own arm." A man shall play the cannibal upon himself. Literally, every man shall fly at every other man's arm, and every man shall be eating human flesh, for there is nothing else to eat.

Then, too, there is to be internecine war: Manasseh shall fly at Ephraim, and Ephraim at Manasseh, and they who could agree upon nothing between themselves always agree in flying together against Judah. This is what wickedness will bring the world to—to murder, to mutual hatred and distrust, to perdition. We do not understand the power of wickedness, because at present, owing to religious thinking and action and moral civilisation, there are so many mitigating circumstances, so many relieving lights; but wickedness in itself let loose upon the earth, and the earth is no longer the abode of green thing, of fair flower, or singing bird, of mutual trust and love: it becomes a pandemonium. If we could consider this deeply, it would make us solemn. We do not consider it; we are prepared to allow it as a theory or a conjecture, but the realisation of it is kept far from us. The wicked man kills himself; puts his teeth into the flesh of his own arm, and gnaws it with the hunger of a wild beast. That is what wickedness comes to! It is not an intellectual error, not a slight and passing mistake, not a lapse of judgment, or a momentarily lamentable act of misconduct which can easily be repaired: the essence of wickedness is destruction. Wickedness would no sooner hesitate to kill a little child than to snap a flower. The thing that keeps the world from suicide is the providence of God. Were God to take away the restraining influences which are keeping society together, society would fall into mutual enmity, and the controversy could only end in mutual death. "For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still" (ix. 21). Do not blame the judgment, blame the sin; do not say, How harsh is God, say, How corrupt, how blasphemous is man!

"Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed" (x. 1).

The Lord's voice is always for righteousness. What is it that is denounced? It is the very thing that is to be denounced evermore. There is nothing local or temporary in this cause of divine offence. The Lord is against all unrighteous decrees, unnatural alliances, and evil compacts. This is the very glory of the majesty of omnipotence, that it is enlisted against every form of evil and wrong. Then—"Woe unto them that decree

unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed"—scribes or registrars who preserve all the forms of the court, and keep their pens busy upon the court register, writing down every case, and appearing to do the business correctly and thoughtfully; and yet all the while these very registrars were themselves plotting "to take away the right from the poor, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless." The court of law was turned into a means of robbery, as it is in nearly every country under the sun. The scribes who wrote down the law were men who secretly or overtly broke it; the judge used his ermine as a cloak, that under its concealment he might thrust his hand further into the property of those who had no helper. "For all this his anger is not turned away." Blessed be his name! Oh, burn thou against us all; mighty, awful, holy God, burn more and more, until we learn by fire what we can never learn by pity. The Lord speaks evermore for the poor, for the widow, for the fatherless, for the helpless. Here we pause, as we have often done before in these readings, to say, How grand is the moral tone of the Bible; how sweetly does God speak for truth and righteousness; how condescendingly does he enlist omnipotence on the side of innocent helplessness.

Now we come upon an awful irony:—

"What will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory?" (x. 3).

This is more difficult to bear than was the fire of judgment—this spectral tone, this irony from behind the clouds, this mockery that makes our marrow cold. "What will ye do?" What is your last resource? When it becomes your turn to play in this great game, what move will you take? That hour comes in all life. For a long time men can be moving to and fro, and changing their position, and trying their policy, and deceiving even the very elect by the agility of their movements; but there comes a time when the last step must be taken, the last hand must be shown, the last declaration must be made. You have sinned away—so the impeachment would seem to say—the day of judgment; you have mocked righteousness; you have turned

the sanctuary into a school of blasphemy ; you have robbed the poor, the widow, the fatherless ; you have trodden down every thing of beauty that God planted upon the earth, and you would have blackened the stars with night if your evil hands could have reached them ! Now there has come the critical moment of agony, and the question is, "What will ye do ?" Now for genius, now for the fine intellectual stroke, now for the stroke that will settle everything your own way—what is it ? Open your right hand, and it contains emptiness ; your left, and it is rich with nothingness. "What will ye do ?" You have sworn every oath, and the very familiarity of your irreverence has turned your blasphemy stale. "What will ye do ?" Bribe ? You have nothing in the treasure-house, and your money is not current coin with this reckoning. "What will ye do ?" Confess ? Too late : that would be a coward's trick. "What will ye do ?" That same question occurs in the Christian books—"How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation ?" That question is—HOW ?

NOTE.

"The whole passage, from the fifth verse of chap. x. to the end of chap. xii., should be read together, beginning with the solemn denunciation, as the title to the whole, of 'Woe to Asshur!' Assyria, in all its pride, was but a rod in the hands of Jehovah, and when the appointed work of judgment was done, the instrument of that judgment, worthless in itself, would be cast away and destroyed. . . . Then follows a description of the Assyrian's march upon Jerusalem, which, says Delitzsch, 'æsthetically considered, is one of the most magnificent that human poetry has ever produced.' It is also very interesting to the reader of modern days, inasmuch as it clears up a difficulty which most earlier expositors had felt, and enables us by means of the Assyrian monuments to add another to the 'undesigned' confirmations of Scripture. It has been usual to refer the account of this march to the history of Sennacherib, in Hezekiah's later days, after the capture of Lachish [2 Kings xviii. 13-17 ; Isa. xxxvi. 1, 2]. But then, it has been remarked, Sennacherib advanced from the south-west, *i.e.* from the road leading to Egypt ; while the route so vividly described by the prophet is from the north-east. Expositors therefore have generally contented themselves with calling the description 'ideal.' It depicts such an approach as the Assyrian king might have made, had he come from that quarter ! But now we know that there was another invasion before that of Sennacherib."—REV. S. G. GREEN, D.D.

Chapter x. 5—xii. 6.

THE BURDEN OF ASSYRIA.

A NEW section begins at chapter x. verse 5,* and goes to chapter xii. 6. The section deals with Assyria, and might be called in some sense "The Burden of Assyria." It is most difficult to understand. All annotators have been more or less perplexed by it. The translators have put in words with which to help themselves over literal difficulties. Sometimes Assyria seems to be speaking as the prophet himself, and sometimes the prophet seems to be speaking as if Assyria were uttering judgments upon wrong. All we can do is to endeavour to find some central line upon which can be strung all the wise and abiding words which history has proved to be just and useful.

In studying the history of Assyria as given in this section we shall see at least some principles of the divine government. Assyria itself is dead and gone; for us the vision in its literal detail is useless; it has taken its place in antique, grey history; but it is of infinite importance that we should trace the common

* "It was evidently this complete overthrow of Samaria by Sargon in 722-721 which Isaiah had behind him when he wrote x. 9-11. We must, therefore, date the prophecy after 721, when nothing was left as a bulwark between Judah and the Assyrian. We do so with reluctance. There is much in x. 5-34 which suits the circumstances of Tiglath-pileser's invasion. There are phrases and catch-words coinciding with those in vii.-ix. 7; and the whole oration is simply a more elaborate expression of that defiance of Assyria which inspires such of the previous prophecies as viii. 9, 10. Besides, with the exception of Samaria, all the names in the Assyrian's boastful catalogue—Carchemish, Calno, Arpad, Hamath, and Damascus—might as justly have been vaunted by the lips of Tiglath-pileser as by those of Sargon. But in spite of these things, which seem to vindicate the close relation of x. 5, 34 to the prophecies which precede it in the canon, the mention of Samaria as being already destroyed justifies us in divorcing it from them. While they remain dated from before 732 we place it subsequent to 722."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A., D.D.

line of providence, the abiding quantity of history, the thing that never changes, and thus feel that we are still under a government strong in righteousness and gracious in discipline. The thing always to be sought after is the abiding unit; the unit without which calculation is impossible: that we may discover with gracious certainty in a narrative so graphic and vivid as that which is given in the text. Let us say that God speaks by the mouth of the prophet, saying:—

“O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation” (x. 5).

The meaning might be this: “I will choose a staff with which I will chastise my people: I have fixed my choice upon Assyria; I will so use that proud nation that my people shall begin to fear that for their sin they shall be heavily dealt with: I will choose Assyria as an instrument of vengeance.” We must not omit the reflection that this was a terrible thing for Assyria. What man likes to be an instrument through which righteousness will punish some other man? Who would willingly accept a calling and election so severe? The man himself may have nothing to avenge upon the one to whom he is sent as a judgment, and yet he is doing things without being able to explain them; as we have already seen, he is setting up hostilities which he can only partially defend and hardly at all explain:—

“I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (x. 6).

Thus nations are sent to do work they do not like. What are the nations but instruments in the hands of him who made them? So we are puzzled and perplexed by many an imperial policy; we do not like it, and yet still it proceeds to work out all its mysterious issues—now severe, now beneficent. We are in tumult and darkness and perplexity, thick and that cannot be disentangled; and how seldom we realise the fact that all this may be a divine movement, a clouding of the divine presence, and an outworking of divine and eternal purposes.

“Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so” (x. 7).

Assyria does not know what he is going to do; he is quick

at giving an explanation of his own action, but it does not occur to him that he is instrument, servant, mere errand-bearer to the King of glory. "He meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so,"—that is to say, it never occurs to him that he is an instrument of providence, that he has been selected in order that he might manifest divine judgments. We cannot tell what we are doing. Assyria said that it was in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few; he was simply a warrior; it did not enter into his conception that he was anything more than a conqueror, a proud destroyer, one before whose advent all nations quailed. Thus the Lord useth the pride of man. For a moment he gratifies human vanity; for a little while he allows man to proceed upon certain conceptions, that in the long run he may work out his own judgment, and illustrate and vindicate his own providence. If the action were within a definite time, then moral criticism might fall upon its enunciation; but the Lord speaks in circular periods, in complete lapses of time; all the ages lie in their nakedness before him when he declares judgment or blessing: his action, therefore, is not to be interrupted at some inferior point of punctuation, but is to be allowed to roll itself out in all its fulness, and when the unfoldment is complete the judgment may be pronounced. How many men there are just in the position of Assyria at this particular time! They lift up their hand, and nations tremble; they inflict a studied discourtesy, and all the land wonders why it should have been, and begins to predict unrest, unsettlement, war, and great ruin. The particular man, seeing all this as the issue of his policy or his neglect, inflames himself with pride, burns with vanity, lifts himself up as if he would touch the stars, feels in all his blood the tingle of sovereignty. Poor fool! he does not know that he is like a saw which God has taken up to sever a piece of wood. The Lord knows what a man is; he knows all that is in man, and he uses him for the education of man, he employs one nation for the deliverance of another. The scheme of providence is a tessellated scheme, full of little pieces, marvellously related to one another, and no one can lay his hand upon a single point and say, This is all. There is no single point in divine providence; all history is consolidated; all the action of time means the grand significance that it issues in,

We are to beware of temporary definitions and temporary conclusions. Any conclusion to which we can now come is open to the modification of to-morrow. Only God can conclude ; only Christ can say, " It is finished ! "

Assyria, then, begins to exult ; he says :—

" For he saith, Are not my princes altogether kings ? is not Calno as Carchemish ? is not Hamath as Arpad ? is not Samaria as Damascus ? " (ix. 8, 9).

I have done all these things, and all that is yet to be done is part and parcel of the same triumph :—

" As my hand hath found the kingdoms of the idols, and whose graven images did excel them of Jerusalem and of Samaria ; shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols ? " (ix. 10, 11).

This is intoxication ; this is the wilderness of military vanity. The king of Assyria sees all things falling into his hands : he says, Calno shall be no more than Carchemish was ; and Hamath shall be as Arpad, and Samaria as Damascus : as I have killed many, I will kill more ; as I have subdued hitherto all along the line, so I will continue my work of subjugation until the whole series fall at my feet. Thus providence is unknown and misinterpreted ; thus do men get hold of the wrong end of things, and talk idiotically. Assyria does not pause, and say, Why is this ? is there more blood to be shed ? are there more people to be trampled upon ? This is hard work : I would the gods would save me from this execution. Then Assyria would have been a child of heaven. But who ever takes the events of life as chastening, instructing, and disciplining the mind ? Who receives his wages in order that he may do good with the money ? who accepts his rewards in order that he may encourage and deepen his gratitude ? Let us pray for a right conception of providence. If we are sent on cruel errands, let us go about them diligently, but with a subtle reluctance that will import into our hardest judicial tones some gospel of God. Assyria misunderstood providence, which we are doing every day ; we are taking our influence, and magnifying it so as to feed our vanity, instead of accepting it as a trust, and asking God to be merciful to us even in the bestowment of power.

Now another section opens, a wholly distinct view looms upon the vision :—

“Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom ; for I am prudent : and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man” (x. 12, 13).

I will choke him in his boasts. While his throat is inflamed with his own vanity I will lay my hand upon his, and murder him in the sight of heaven. Providence is a large term. It is not a government of fits and starts and spasms that are unrelated to one another ; it is righteous, solemn, tranquil,—yea, tranquil though the detail, the immediate phenomena may be associated with tumult and riot and wantonness ; within the whole action there is a zone of calm. We are not to misunderstand the clouds, though they be laden with snow. Where are they but in God's hand ? Beyond them the moon shines nightly without a flutter, and the sun holds his court all day without dread of the interruption of his sovereignty. All that may be within the eye-line is full of darkness, and tumult, and trouble ; we are filled with distress because of what we see, but then we only see that which is as a handful of a very small space. All the tranquillities of the universe are undisturbed by the little thunder that roars and vibrates in the lower atmospheres. So is it with the purpose of God. Assyria shall be used to an end ; he shall accomplish that end ; but for his pride he shall be punished. All self-idolatry is punishment ; all presumption comes to a bad end. Assyria said, “By the strength of my hand I have done it,” and God shall prove that it was otherwise, that his poor little fist did nothing in the matter but as it was directed by the palm of omnipotence. Assyria said, “I am prudent,” and God will turn his prudence to shame and confusion, for the whole scheme was not planned by his military wit ; it was all laid out by him whose artillery is the starry heavens, and whose resources are his own infinity.

Then Assyria makes a figure. The metaphor is to be found in the following verse (x. 14) :—

"And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people : and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth ; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped."

So Assyria represents himself as a gigantic fowler who had gone out and captured all the feathered tribes, and not one of them rebelled against his well-laid schemes. The image is graphic ; the vanity of Assyria has made him for a moment poetical. How otherwise could the pagan mind think ? When a man has both hands full, what else can he say but that he is rich ? If all his schemes prosper, how other can he lay down on his own couch at night than as a prudent man ? When not a line of his policy has failed, is he not at liberty to say, None moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped ; I seemed to fasten all the birds like the eye of a basilisk ; they all gave themselves up to me : behold, how great I am, and how my wonder eclipses the sun ? The pagan mind must talk so, because it has no worthy centre ; it does not calculate by the right standard or regulate by the one meridian ; it can see no farther than itself : itself is its universe. Only when right conceptions of a religious kind enter the mind does the mind look round for deepest causes, and wonder, and pray, and say, Would God I could find out the reality of this case ! things come too easily to me : surely God must be using me for some purpose I cannot understand ; why do these eagles fall into my hand ? how large they are and strong, with wings that were made to darken the sun ; why do I capture them so easily ? why does my business prosper more than my neighbour's ? he complains, and I proceed, adding store to store ; other men devise plans, and they come to nothing ; my policy always blossoms and fructifies, and comes back upon me a hundredfold : how is this ? surely God is using me to an end, and I cannot tell what it is. O God, make me humble, calm, watchful ; I do not wholly like this ; I would there were more resistance to me ; the very facility of my progress through a land of rock and mountain and darkness makes me feel that I am being impelled or lured, rather than walking by my voluntary motion and determination. This would be sacred talk, speech of salt ; a sacrifice of the tongue acceptable unto God.

Then the Lord reasons thus :—

"Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith ? or shall

the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood" (x. 15).

How satiric is God! Can sarcasm whet a keener edge than this? O Assyria, thou art but an iron axe with a wooden handle, and God has been using thee for smiting trees:—thou art but a sharp-toothed saw, which God himself has sharpened in order that he might cut with it a piece of timber: do not shake thyself against them that lift thee up; and, staff, forget not that thou art only wooden after all. So we are abased; yea, those who stand near the altar and speak the eloquence of God are told by a thousand angels that like themselves they are "but ministers": they have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of men.

And still further, God reduces the pride of those that lift themselves up against him—"The rest of the trees of his forest shall be few, that a child may write them" (x. 19). Even what is left is just sufficient to provoke contempt. A completer desolation would have been more a blessing, but to have two or three trees left out of a whole forest seems to add to the bitterness of the loss. The trees are a little number, and children please themselves by counting the number on their fingers; and the man whose trees they count was once the possessor of unmeasured forests: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Riches take to themselves wings, and flee away. The wicked have been in great power, and they have departed without telling whither they have gone; they have not left even the rustle of a wing behind them to indicate the direction of their flight. We have much now; upstairs and downstairs, all full; to-morrow every chamber will be emptied, and yet not a door will have been opened by human hand. Seal up your treasures; take wax, and plenty of it; melt it down, stamp it with your crest—frailest sign of vanity—and to-morrow will find you empty-handed, and you will open your mouth in wonder, and ask who did it; and the secret-keeping air, the confidant of God, will not allow even a little bird to tell you whither the property has gone. Use it well! Blessed is the true and faithful servant who toils and prays!

Then a word of hope. When could the Lord conclude a speech without some tone, gospel-like in its cheerfulness and tenderness and gentleness?

"And it shall come to pass in that day, that the remnant of Israel, and such as are escaped of the house of Jacob, shall no more again stay upon him that smote them; but shall stay upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God" (x. 20, 21).

Where have we found that expression before—"the mighty God"? We found it only a chapter back, and in the sixth verse of the ninth chapter—"His name shall be called Wonderful, Counseller, The mighty God"—the same word in the Hebrew: what if it be the same God in reality, and that God be Christ? There shall be a remnant, and God can use that remnant as he can use seed for planting, for sowing, for purposes of raising a new generation, planting a new forest, holy unto himself.

This is the providence, then, under which we live. Facts prove it. We are under law and criticism of a moral kind: our conduct is examined, our motives are inquired into and pronounced upon by the just One; every morning is as a white throne set in the heavens; every noonday is as an eye of fire watching the ways of men; every night is a pavilion of rest, or an image of despair. The axe of heaven is lifted up against all the thick trees that suppose themselves to be independent of God. All moral loveliness is cherished as the pearl greater in value than all others. This is the economy under which we live! We are not left without law, judgment, supervision, criticism; every one of us must give an account of himself to God. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing." If for a few years we grow towards strength, we soon turn the growing point, and go down into old age and weakness, that we may know ourselves to be but men. Life is a great triumph up to middle age, because the man may be always well; he may grow in strength and in prosperity, and he may represent himself as a successful fowler; but after that grey hairs are here and there upon him, and he knoweth it not, and presently men may

say as he passes by, He stoops a little more ; his memory will begin to be a little blurred and clouded, and though he can keep good reckoning, yet he must trust to paper more than he ever trusted before. If we plant vineyards and forests, and subdue wildernesses by generous culture, we die whilst we gaze on our success, and are buried under the very flowers which have rewarded our toil. This is the economy under which the nations have ever lived, and under which every little life works out its little day. If we do wrong a spectre touches us in the darkness, and makes us cold with fear. What is it? It is the right hand of God ; it is the feeling of righteousness ; it is the sign of justice. If we do right, all heaven broadens its glory over our heads, and fills the path we walk with flowers of light. This is the economy under which we live : let us not be fools, but wise, understanding all these claims and demands, owning their righteousness, and responding to their appeals. And the end ? so near, always so near. We shall see all the meaning of sword and pestilence and grim famine, of cloud and storm and angry thunder, of love, and mercy, and hope, and gospel sacred with the blood of sacrifice. By-and-by, yet a little while, no cloud is eternal ; it is but vapour after all, and the wind will cleanse it away. When the vision is declared we shall know that Righteousness is the security of the universe, hell the necessity of unrepented sin, and heaven is the God-built, eternal home of men who touched the atoning Saviour with the reverent, grateful hand of faith. History is in a great tumult : nation clashes against nation in the shock of war ; man eats the flesh of the arm of man, and grows the hungrier for his feast of blood ; the poor are little counted of, the weak go to the wall ; banners red as blood are being figured all over with lines of fire, with the motto, " Might is right." O Lord, how long ? In reply to this question we are entitled to go back upon all the record of history, and trace the line of providence through the whole—a line now terrible as righteousness, now gracious as the love of Christ. The Lord reigneth !

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, we thank thee for the promise of all bright days ; we rejoice that there is coming a time when cloud and storm will be done away, and peace and loveliness and glory shall crown all things : this is the end of thy government, this is the meaning of thy love. We accept it as such, and cheer ourselves meanwhile with this bright and glowing hope. Thou wilt come and rectify all things ; thou wilt set up the standard of the sanctuary everywhere ; righteousness shall be the base and rock on which things are built, and at the top of the pillar there shall be lilywork, so that strength and beauty shall be in the house of the Lord. All things hurtful thou wilt subdue ; all violent forces thou wilt control ; all iniquity and unrighteousness thou wilt put down, and the Sabbath of the Lord shall dawn upon a reconciled and purified earth. This is our hope ; this is the poetry that sings to us ; this is the prophecy that makes us glad. Lord, how long ? say thy saints in their groaning. Lord, how long ? do they say again when the burden presses upon their failing strength. Yet thou knowest all things ; the ages are in thy keeping and under thy direction ; all time is God's instrument, and he will use it for the advancement of all causes true and pure and righteous. Enable us to control our impatience, to subdue all impious eagerness, and to wait in sweet contentment and solid assurance, knowing that the Lord will come at his own time, and set up his kingdom, and rule over all, and we shall know his coming as the earth knows the summer. The years are all thine, and thou dost mete them out one by one ; to no man dost thou give five years, to another two ; thou givest to each man one year, one day, one breath ; and herein dost thou teach us the uncertainty of life and its necessary brevity, and suggest to us the coming and final judgment of all things. May we redeem the time ; may we make the most of it ; may we turn every day into a Sabbath, and every Sabbath may we sanctify with redoubled sacrifice : thus our life shall grow into a song, thus even the night-time shall be vocal with praise, and thus shall we magnify thy name, and return unto thee manifold, because of the seed thou hast sown in good ground. Thou knowest the want of every heart, the pain of every life, the shadow which darkens every path, and the cold wind which chills all the pulses that beat within us ; we will, therefore, leave ourselves in thine hand. We can tell thee nothing ; thou dost search us and try us, and see if there be any wicked way in us, that thou mayest not destroy us, but lead us in the way everlasting. Thy will be done. Receive us into thine own hands ; direct us by thine own Spirit ; fill us with wisdom and understanding, and endow us with a sagacious mind. May ours be the highest Christian courage, fearing nothing, hoping all things, seeing no danger, dreading no foe, but constantly moving onward, with the dignity of

conviction, and with the patience of those to whom is entrusted an immortal hope. Lord, bless the land. God save the Queen : establish her throne in righteousness, and may its canopy be as a banner of love. The Lord bless all the nations of the earth, for all the nations should be one empire, ruled by the Son of God. Blessed Jesus, thou art the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world ; for that world, therefore, do we pray, that every acre of it may be sown with gospel seed, that every handful of its soil may be consecrated by the touch of honest men, and that the whole world may be like a returned prodigal, received with joy and thankfulness into the family of the stars. Pity us in all our littleness ; pardon us wherein our sin grows upon us like a rising mountain, and send comfort by thy Cross, Messiah, Emmanuel, Son of God ! Amen.

Chapter xi.

PROPHECY AND HISTORY.

WE should connect the opening of the eleventh chapter with the close of the tenth in order to feel the full force of the contrast. There we read : " And he shall cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one." Then comes the prophecy that " there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots " (ver. 1). The cedar of Lebanon was the symbol of Assyrian power. It was a poor symbol. Looked at botanically, it very vividly represented the passing pomp of a Pagan empire. It is of the pine genus, and sends out no suckers, and when it is cut down it is gone. The oak is the symbol of Israel's power, and though it be cut down it grows again—" there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots "—out of the very lowest stump that is left in the ground. In order to terminate the growth of right things and right lives you must really uproot them ; and that is impossible. There are trees that can be cut down, and they have no to-morrow ; and there are others which, though cut down to the very surface of the earth, have sap within themselves, and have laid such hold upon the earth, and upon the whole solar system through the earth, that they will renew their youth, and be green next year. What is the symbol of our power ? Is ours an influence that can be cut down and never revive ? or are we so rooted in the Eternal that though persecution may impoverish us, and we may suffer great deprivation and depletion of every kind, yet we

shall come up again in eternal youthfulness, and great shall be our strength and just pride? Let every man answer this question for himself.

"There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse." We thought the rod was coming "out of the house of David." There may be an instructive point here. David was a king, royal, marked in his highest time by features that impressed the vision and the imagination; it was better, therefore, to take the case of Jesse in his loneliness and comparative obscurity, and to start the Christian story from that lowly home. Nothing is of full compass in benevolence and philosophy and true wisdom that does not begin at the lowest point, and work through all the strata to the very surface and uppermost line of things. Better, therefore, know that though David was very great and glorious, yet even he was the son of Jesse. Let us go back to the humblest point, the very starting line, and learn that this Son of God was not the son of a king only, but the son of a king's lowly father. Christianity is the religion of the common people. The gospel appeals to all men, rich and poor, in every zone and clime, and is most to those who need it most.

"... and a Branch shall grow out of his roots"—a branch, a Netzer; he shall be called a Netzer, a Nazarene: Jesus shall be associated with Nazareth, the word which traces itself back to another word which signifies branch; his name shall for ever be associated with growth, and beauty, and loveliness, and fruitfulness. All this is in the future, but the future may be the most present reality to our consciousness. Did we know it, we should feel that heaven is nearer than earth; that eternity is closer to us than time can ever be; that by a sweet grace, a most tender necessity, the future is the real present, by way of inspiration, encouragement, and vivification; it is thus that posterity has done much for us, though we sneeringly inquire, What has posterity done? Posterity represents the future, the coming dawn, the very period for which all good men are working; the Sabbath of the world, the parliament of man; and, therefore, by its lure, by its holy seduction and gracious welcome, it lifts us out of the deep pit, and calls us away from the shadowed valley, and gives courage in the day of strife, and hope in the night of despondency.

Let us further read about this man the Branch :—

"And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding ["the faculty of clear perception leading him aright in matters whether of intellectual or moral interest (1 Kings x. 8; Job xxviii. 28)"], the spirit of counsel and might ["sagacity in conceiving a course of action, and firmness and courage in carrying it out (cf. xxxvi. 5)"], the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord ["a full apprehension of what Jehovah demands, and the inclination to act accordingly"] (ver. 2).

We seem to have read these words before; surely the prophet is now quoting some other man; what man is he quoting? They are solemn strong words, clear-cut, of diamond value; and we have a half-conscious familiarity with them ourselves. Isaiah is quoting from the Book of Proverbs. This description of the coming One is taken from a book in which there would seem to be but little poetry. Isaiah was a great statesman, a strong, shrewd, sagacious man, fed at the banqueting-table of the Book of Proverbs—that pithiest of all books, every sentence a light, every verse the wisdom of many and the wit of one. Isaiah was a student of the old scrolls; having much to do, either personally or relatively, with the sanctuary and its services, he was a student as well as a statesman; and when he comes to describe the mind that would bless the world with infinite beneficence he finds all the lineaments in the Book of Proverbs. When we come to right definitions, large and wise, we shall find that poetry may be in an apothegm. Some poets are praised because their poetry is in their thought rather than in their versification; in some instances we are puzzled by the mere rhyming of the poet, it does not fall harmoniously and easily into its lines; therein we are told that the poetry is in the philosophy, in the inner and inspiring thought, rather than in the verbal form. So it is in the Book of Proverbs. Truth is poetry; poetry is truth; and Christ when he comes shall represent in himself, not some glowing ode, but that Book of Proverbs, every sentence of which is like a jewel fit to be set in a king's crown.

"The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him." That also is a familiar phrase we meet with in Judges (xi. 29): "Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah;" also in xiii. 25: "And the Spirit of the Lord began to move him" [Samson]. Again in John i. 33: "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending."

That Spirit of the Lord has *always* been in human history. It accounts for all heroisms, noble darings, self-sacrifices, for all labours meant, not for the blessedness of the labourer himself, but for the gratification and progress of other ages. Do not limit yourselves by a theological and technical definition. "The Spirit of the Lord" is a large expression : it has to do with the mystery of mind ; with the secrecy of motive ; with the inner springs of life, and thought, and purpose ; with dreams and visions, and even with superstitions and fanaticisms ; it has worked in India and in China ; it has written books in characters that are strange to us ; it dwelt with Plato, and it may be with some to-day who are unaware of the name of their Guest, who rules and blesses them with light. Wherever you find a wise word you find the Spirit of God ; wherever you find genuine morality you find a revelation of heaven ; be it in what books it may, it is God's thought, and we must resolutely and gratefully claim it as such ; otherwise, we shall have rival moralities, rival temples of wisdom ; whereas there is but one goodness and one sanctuary.

Mark his intellectual qualification ; he is to be "of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord" (ver. 3)—a word which relates to the power of smell or scent ; he is to have that keen sense which the hound has when the game is not far away, and yet is deeply hidden ; he is to know wisdom and right and truth as the thirsty hart smells the waterbrooks ; or, by another etymology, he is to draw his breath in the fear of the Lord ; that is to say, the fear of the Lord is to be his native breath. Religion is to be no burden to him, no superimposition which he must carry, whether he will or no ; his religion is his breath, he will pray because he breathes, he will speak because he breathes ; it is part of himself, of his very nature ; it belongs to a great system of voluntariness, which constantly and continually gives itself out for the benefit of those who are within the range of its influence. He is to be a discerning Christian ; his eyes are like unto fire ; he sees all things, yea, the deep things of God ; there is no possibility of passing off a counterfeit upon him ; he knows the hypocrite afar off, though he be on bent knees, and his eyes are lifted up to heaven in simulated piety. This gift of discernment is a gift which may be enjoyed by the whole Church. Have

we lost the spirit of discernment? How comes it that men who are religious are thought to be mentally inferior? They ought to be the highest minds in the world; they ought to have the candle of the Lord at their disposal—a candle which lets its revealing light fall upon all secret corners and cunning devices. There should be no possibility of deceiving the spirit of righteousness which is in the renewed man; he will know the hypocrite by his very attitude. Yet it may be possible to deceive even the very elect. But we cannot deceive the Lord. The Lord looketh upon the heart; even though we have many qualities that are unworthy, yet he can see beneath them all, and detect the genuine seed, the real desire after his kingdom, and the real sympathy with his purpose. That is the difference between the bad man and the good man: the bad man endeavours to keep an outwardly reputable surface, and all his iniquity is within, at the very centre and core of things; the good man's imperfections are many, and are broadly seen, but the more deeply you go into his character the more rich he is; he is honest at the core. By this God will judge us. If we say, Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee, though yesterday I denied thee, the appeal will stand if it be the appeal of an honest man; the wound, the slight, will be forgiven, forgotten, on the sight of the first penitential tear, and the ardent desire to be better will be accepted, and answered like a prayer.

Look at his moral qualifications. His official attitude is that of a smiter—"he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth." The word "earth" is not to be taken here in its geographical sense; "the earth" represents temporary powers, the rulers of the passing day, the triflers who are playing with the peoples, and who are using the nations for selfish and unpatriotic purposes: this ruler shall smite the earth, break the tyrant's power, put down the oppressor, and achieve victory over the victor. That is one of his moral qualifications. Look at his dress—"righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins." He is clothed with righteousness and faithfulness. The girdle keeps all the other garments in their place. There is an upper girdle and a lower girdle, and the idea of completeness is thus suggested and confirmed.

Look at his influence upon Nature :—

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den” (xi. 6-8).]

All nature will be under his control. When the eye sees him it will recognise him. There is a majesty before which we all retire; an impressiveness of power, a consciousness of real dignity, in the presence of which we hold our tongues, and wait for him who is clad with righteousness and faithfulness, and crowned with wisdom, to speak the first word and lead the conversation. Beautiful, indeed, is this conquest over nature, and beautiful the test by which it is confirmed—“A little child shall lead them.” The suckling shall play with the cobra, and the weanling shall put his hand on the basilisk, and a great reconciliation shall take place; there shall be no longer any to hurt or destroy in all God’s holy mountain. A little child shall stretch out his hand to the eyeball of the basilisk as a man will put out his hand to a gleaming diamond. That is the literal meaning of the prophecy. When the mother sees her little child approaching the great cobra she screams, but in this Sabbath day cobra and child shall be friends. These are the miracles of grace; these are the triumphs of Jesus Christ. When he sent forth his apostles he said: “Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” Here is the very realisation of the words of the prophet. Man shall one day take his right place in nature: he shall lay his hand upon the lion, and play with the lion’s neck of thunder; and the little weanling shall run after the most noxious thing, and find it harmless as its own young pure heart. Christ will do his work thoroughly; he will not have a half-heaven; he will not bring in a partial reconciliation. He was before all things, by him all things consist, and without him was not any thing made that was made; when, therefore, he declares that the end of his journey has come, we shall find even the animals within the circle of his influence, and the most violent things shall sit

down in meekness, and look up as if in prayer. What are these animals? Who made them? Who can explain them? Who knows their future? This is a gracious mystery at all events, and may be accepted as a fact—that when man is right with God the animals will be right with man; when man is right with God, the earth will be right with man, and will feel as if she could not do enough for him in growing him all the bread he wants, and then giving him more than he needs. “Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us.”

“They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.” Hurting and destroying were no part of the divine plan from the first. Hurting and destroying, acts of violence and cruelty, these have no place in the divine policy as such; they are brought in as dire necessities; they follow the way of sin, that they may judge it and condemn it, and inflict penalty upon it; but hurting and destroying are but temporary ministries; God’s whole thought is of love, and healing, and well-being.

How is all this to be done? Under what great signal is it to take place? The answer is sublime: “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (xi. 9). This is to be a religious miracle. If there were fuller knowledge of God in the world there would be more peace amongst men; if the Lord’s kingdom were understood, the Sabbath of the millennium would dawn. But men do not understand the kingdom of God; they make it narrow, they imprison it within unworthy limitations, they mistake the infinity of truth, and they think they can build a house fit for God. There is the perpetual difficulty. We ought to feel that the largest house we build for him is too small for any attribute of his character; that the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain him. So we should believe about truth. No one man can hold all God’s truth, or comprehend it, or reveal it; he can but take his own share of the sunlight, and throw it back in generous reflection upon those who need its help. When men understand God’s kingdom, they will understand that love is the true wisdom; that charity is the true justice; that self-control is the true sovereignty; and that to wait patiently for God is the grand philosophy.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, we would evermore dwell in the valley of vision ; we would belong to the family of the seers, to the city of men who are gifted with foresight, who see the morning while it is yet night, and who see the noonday in the dim dawn. We bless thee for all the men in the world who have had great eyesight, power of far-away vision, who could see things in their right meaning and their true proportion, and so seeing them had the eloquent tongue to tell others what had been revealed. Thou always art revealing something to the human mind ; some new phase of truth thou dost cause us to look upon, and it fills us with religious surprise, for having gazed upon it with religious wonder we exclaim, There is no searching of his understanding. Do thou every day surprise us with thy love ; though we expect it, may it come with such newness as to awaken our wonder. Thou art always before us, thou dost in very deed prevent us ; we thought we were first, and lo, we were last, and are always last, for who can be before God ? For all thy daily mercies we bless thee ; they are but a greater mercy broken up into morsels : surely we will set ourselves to find the meaning of them ; they are not complete, they are parts of a stupendous whole. Help us to use every mercy as a cue, that we may follow it, and connect it with other mercies, until at last we say, Behold, this is the King of the Jews, the crucified Son of man ! We bless thee with daily blessings ; our doxology is a daily song, for behold thy compassions come with every morning, and thy faithfulness is sealed anew at eventide. Bless us in the Lord, the Christ, the Well of Salvation, the Spring and Origin of truth, the Sovereign of all hearts, the Man who died for us, and thus proved his deity. Amen.

Chapter xii.

WELLS OF SALVATION.

IT is time we had a hymn in this prophecy of Isaiah, for the reading has been like a succession of thunderstorms and earthquakes. Now and then there has been a bright line, and once indeed the very name Immanuel appeared ; but taking the preceding eleven chapters as a whole, we seem to remember little but rain and storm and sword and battle, and shaking of things strong and mighty. It is curious how the song always comes in at the right time in this revelation of God. Some say Isaiah did not write this song. It is of no consequence to us who wrote it :

here it is, and it is in the right place, and it expresses the right thought, and there is probably more evidence for the authorship of Isaiah than for the authorship of any other man. Some have said it is not like his style: but what is his style? What is the style of the sky? Is it for two days alike? Who could write the history of the sky simply as it appears to the vision of man? The accounts would seem to contradict one another, for the sky passes through panoramic changes innumerable, infinite, and all beautiful where they are not grand. So with the style of this great statesman Isaiah. He handles things with the infinite ease of conscious power; he is as strong in his music as he is in his prophecy.

Let us look at this little song; let us sit down awhile as in a green pasture, and hear the sweet music: the purling brook cannot be far away; the sky is clothed with summer, and the day is quiet with the very spirit of peace. Let us see whether we would not like to covet the song, and steal it honestly, and appropriate it, as if we ourselves were the authors of it, for there is no song worth singing that every man does not feel he might have written, and would if he could. To some is given a great gift of words, but that gift is useless unless it express what is in every heart, and then as soon as we hear what the man has said, we leap forward as if in gratulation and blessing, because he has said exactly what was lying dumbly and glowingly within us. Every true song is the work of everybody. Is this song true? The prophecy has declared that "the Lord shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make men go over dryshod. And there shall be an highway for the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria; like as it was to Israel in the day that he came up out of the land of Egypt" (xi. 15, 16). We need example days, pattern times, to which we can refer with the familiarity of intelligence and thankfulness. The Gulf of Suez shall be divided like the Red Sea; the seven mouths that enclose and intersect the delta of the Nile shall be smitten; and the second exodus like as it was shall be accomplished amid signs and wonders: a highway shall be raised—

what in modern cities is called a causeway, a side pavement. Eastern kings made such a way for their armies, and the remnant of the people of God are to march in triumph along the great plains of Mesopotamia, and the exiles are to return from Assyria, and no sooner do they get home again than they sing this carol—"O Lord, I will praise thee : though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me" (ver. 1). Only men with such an experience can sing. It is next to impossible to sing in modern days. Singing is rapture when it is religious ; it is inspiration, it is madness, it would be called sensational now. That word "sensational" will kill the Church. Observe if that be not a true prophecy. We have only to call a service "sensational" to set persons immediately against it, though they never took the pains to inquire into the etymology or real meaning of the word. This hymn of praise was very sensationally sung. When men escape from the hand of the oppressor, and have a song handed to them, they are not likely to pule over it, or to stifle it in their throats. We can imagine the utterances of thunder, of joy ecstatic, of joy almost beyond expression.

Let us look carefully into the structure of the song. First of all we notice that there is reason under the music—"Though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me." Does music stoop down to accept the service of reason ? It always does so in the Scriptures. There are no songs detached from reason in all the inspired volume. From the earliest times down to the period to which we have now come we find that the song accounts for itself by a substantial and historical reason. It is as if a blossom should account for itself, saying to those who look upon it, You seem pleased with my appearance, you point out my many beauties, you call me delicate, lovely, fragrant ; but do you know that I could not be here at all but for a thing probably you never saw, and never may see—a poor black-looking little root that is hidden in the earth ? Who ever praised my root ? Not an observer has ever asked me if I had one, but I tell you that though I am the singing voice, and the thing of beauty, and the little flag held out waving in the air as part of a grand expression of Nature, having reference to the

Spirit above it and behind it, yet I could not be where I am, or what I am, but for the root deep down in the earth. It is even so with this song-blossom and this thing of beauty in melodious form; it seems to say, You hear me, you like me, you are pleased with my rhythm; you comment upon me from a critical point of view, and say how happy are the symbols, how easy the action, how perfect the accents, how made for music! Ah, did you but know all, you would understand that I could not be where I am, or what I am, if there had not been a root in history, a long process of discipline, deprivation, sorrow, heartache: but now it is over, and the time of the singing of birds has come. So it must be in the sanctuary. There is hardly any singing in any sanctuary except by the few. Where is the great song that makes men sing—that makes the dumb speak? We must not look for that song in printed music, but in historical recollection, in personal thankfulness; and out of all this root-work will come blossoming and beauty, ineffable in loveliness, indescribable in perfectness.

“Thou wast angry with me.” Then there was no music; the clouds quenched the song. Who can sing when the snow is falling coldly and heavily, or when the east wind is blowing cruelly, or when there is a sense of compunction in the heart, when the conscience is out of gear, and when it will not let any part of our life have rest from its ripping criticism?

“Thine anger is turned away.” Now who can help singing in the bright sunshine? Summer makes the song. Even children seem to know this. They do not cower in fear when the sun shines. True, he is a great shining glory in the heavens, but there is not a little child on all the earth that does not seem to know him, and to be able to take sweet and tender liberties with him. Who ever saw a little child running away from the sun? The little one seems to run right into his very arms, and would plunge into that great sea of glory. It is an attractive power; it is a benediction in light; it is a fatherly presence in symbol of glory. So, when the people felt that sin was gone, they also felt that the time for singing was come. Nothing chokes the song so surely as consciousness of sin: it says to a man, You have no right to sing; you are trying to sing God's pure praise through

a throat black as night, hot with the very fire of hell: do not add to your blasphemy by singing under such circumstances!

"Behold, God is my salvation" (ver. 2). Jerome translates this, "Behold, God is my Jesus." The word "salvation" is too narrowly defined in many instances. People suppose that it means a kind of spiritual selfishness which, being expressed in more words, would run in some such fashion as this: Thank God I am safe, whatever may become of anybody else! Any man who can say that, or mean that, or be in any way under such a delusion, simply knows nothing whatever about the spirit of the gospel. "Salvation" is one of the largest terms in human speech. Emancipation does not mean—You are now no longer under obligation to serve your old tyrant or your old master. That is but a negative aspect of emancipation. The true meaning is—You are invested with all the responsibilities of organised liberty; you have conferred upon you an opportunity of developing your whole manhood; you may now show the very best aspect of your character, and, unless you do it, slavery were for you better than freedom. It is so with the fullest meaning of this word salvation. Saved people are generous people, beneficent, charitable, anxious about others; nay, the only explanation of their anxiety about others is that they themselves are conscious of having been saved—not saved from fear only, but saved into life, liberty, and conscious possibility of doing great and small things. Jerome was right in going back to the Old Testament with the key of the New. In fact, we are entitled to begin at Genesis after we have perused the whole gospel story with the profoundest interest, and have received its spirit into our heart. The gospels explain the Pentateuch. There are arithmetics which are awful in their initial hardness. They are all questions. A book of arithmetic is a most audacious interrogator. But at the end of the book, in some cases, there is a key. What different reading! There is not a question in the whole key unless it be at the beginning of an answer, and who, having read the answer, does not feel how easy to have worked out the sum after all if one had only taken pains enough at the beginning? At the same time there is a strong disposition just to appropriate what the key says, and

then, perhaps, to appear before the spectacled master as if we had never heard of such a thing as a key. That would be illegitimate in arithmetic. There have been young arithmeticians who have been guilty of that meanness. But we are called to look at the key in open day ; we are referred to the key ; we are invited and challenged to peruse it, and then to go back with the key in our hand to work out all the mystery of the lock. This is what Jerome did ; so he did not hesitate to take out the word "salvation" in the second verse and put in the word "Jesus," and say with unction and thankfulness, "Behold, God is my Jesus : " his name shall be called Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.

"I will trust, and not be afraid." Then the confidence was complete. The expression is perhaps awkward from one point of view ; that is, from the pedantic point of view. "I will trust"—the sentence might have ended there—"and not be afraid." Is not that merely a repetition ? From a grammatical point of view it may be simply tautology, but from a spiritual point of view there is not one word too much. Fear is very subtle. There is an immediate fear that glares into a man's eyes and makes a coward of him ; over that fear he may get the mastery ; but there is a far-away fear, more a shadow than a substance, an unaccountable feeling of timidity, apprehension. It is not enough to have obtained one great victory over fear, or to have established one strong point of trust ; both these are most desirable things in the Christian life, and necessary indeed to its solidity and progress ; but the work must be completed. It is not enough to have a great cloud that was immediately overhead cleared away ; we must also have the horizon cleansed of all images of dread and suggestions of storm. Who does not know all this in his innermost soul ? Taking the whole Christian view, the Christian feels strong, but when he comes to minute confession, to exhaustive fearless analysis, he says, About some two or three things I am not so confident as I should like to be—about business, about my family, about my social responsibilities, about the constancy of my love ; I sometimes think I see the tempter looking at me at midnight ; nobody else can see him but myself, and yet sometimes right across the darkness I have seen him as clearly as I

ever saw an image in the light: these things I will not talk about. All this must be cleansed away. "I will trust, and not be afraid": I will have this joy positively and negatively; I will have a strong rock at the very centre of things, and a sense that every gate that leads to the castle is strongly guarded, and is in fact impassable by any foe. "Perfect love casteth out fear." Lord, increase our love!

Now comes a mysterious combination of words—"The LORD JEHOVAH." The very type is suggestive, the word "Lord" being printed in small capitals and the word "Jehovah" in large capitals. This is an almost unparalleled combination of terms; certainly it is wholly exceptional. Would not the word "Lord" have done, or the word "Jehovah"? Why this miracle in language? This is a novelty in any style. Here criticism is, as in many other places in Holy Scripture and in the divinest literature, simply helpless—a chatterer instead of a teacher; an instrument of deprivation, not a word of spiritual increase and mental enlargement. Joy creates its own language. On the whole perhaps joy is a poor grammarian. Some men are the victims of grammar, as other men are the victims of propriety; they have never known enthusiasm, they have never had a feeling that they could not express in a word or two; they regard the rapture of others as extravagance or exaggeration. It would be extravagance to them, as it would be a most extravagant thing for a sparrow to attempt to fly with an eagle. Who made any one man the standard and measure of extravagance? Let every man speak for himself. I have seen some instrument of locomotion made of two wheels, and the second or following wheel has not been so large as the first; it would be intolerable impertinence for the little wheel to be calling the other extravagant and aggressive.

Here we come to a sweet word—"the wells of salvation" (ver. 3). How is it that the word "well," signifying a spring of water, is always associated with a music of its own? Who can listen to the plash of water falling down the hillside, and not try to make every drop into a syllable and the whole into a gospel of nature, singing God's praise, and telling of far-away fountains?

One of the most recent and most qualified critics has put the matter clearly, in saying that in the later ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles the priests went in solemn procession to the pool of Siloam, filled a golden vase with water, carried it to the Temple, and poured it out on the western side of the altar of burnt-offering, while the people observing this priestly action chanted the great Hallel or hymn of praise which we have in the Psalms, beginning with cxiii. and ending at cxviii. The action was symbolical; it was also historical: it touched memory at a thousand quick and responsive points, and elicited a hymn not mechanical in its structure only, but in its very mechanism an embodied spirituality. "Wells of salvation": can we improve the expression by making the word "wells" singular instead of plural? May we not say, Christ is the well of salvation? Yet there are words in the singular number which can never be other than plural; they are only grammatically limited; as to all spiritual suggestiveness they are too broad even for plural forms of expression, for they seem to overflow great spaces, and to occupy infinite tracks and continents of memory and thankfulness and hope. Jesus Christ did not disdain to compare himself to a well. On the last day—the great day of the feast—beholding innumerable thirsty men, from all quarters of the land, he said, "If any man thirst"—Lord, how great was that word! Thou didst know that all men have a thirst in the heart which all the rivers in the world can never quench—"If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." This was the voice of the well, the gospel of the fountain, the anthem of the springhead. Jesus said on another occasion, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of him," and he, without questioning or grudging or difficulty, would have given thee living water, spring water, cool as snow, clear as crystal, pure as the love of God. Have we drunk of this well? The river of God is full of water. Are we perishing of thirst? Christians are enabled to bear this testimony, and they ought to bear it, that they have gone from well to well, from spring to spring, and have always had to go back again with weary iteration, journey upon journey, for the thirst returned by the very process of quenching it; but when they came to Jesus, and entered into his spirit and purpose, and became as it were

partakers of his nature, all their aspirations were satisfied, all their highest appetences were appeased.

Now reason is given for another song, or for the continuance of the same—"Sing unto the Lord; for he hath done excellent things" (ver. 5). The song is not called for without a reason being assigned. Is it true that God hath done excellent things—say for ourselves? Do not search ancient history for the excellent things done by God, but search your own little life; and if in that life no excellent things have been wrought, say so, and be dumb so far as this sacrifice of religious praise is concerned. You have a right to be silent. If your life has had no sunshine, no blessing, no help, no sympathy, you have a right to say in the sanctuary, I will not sing, and thus to chide God by your silence. But be sure you can say it. "Life" is a large term; it covers all the days of your breathing, from earliest infancy up till the present moment: it will certainly be a phenomenon without a parallel if any man can say that the sunshine never fell upon his life, that what good he has he has by his own strength and wit, and that he owes nothing to supernatural or superhuman power. Still, if a man can say that, and prove it, he has a right to instruct others by his very silence.

"Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion" (ver. 6). But how extremely opposed to the spirit of propriety! Here is a call for enthusiasm, rapture, and what would generally be denominated madness. Still, the words are here, and they are perfectly clear as to their meaning and purpose, and a reason is given for the cry and for the shout; that reason is—"for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee." "Thou inhabitant of Zion." The Hebrew is feminine: the appeal is to a woman's heart—Cry out and shout, thou daughter of Zion! Without the womanly element the Church is without charm, and without the divinest passion. The woman must lead us, in song, in music, in praise, and by the contagion of her enthusiasm must warm others into responsive and co-operative zeal. Men have become frenzied by earthly deliverances, and rightly so, and brought into paroxysms of thankfulness and joy: why not so in their religious natures? It is recorded by Plutarch that when

the Romans delivered a certain people from the tyranny of the Macedonians and the Spartans, the cry of the delivered men was so great that it dissipated the very air, and birds flying across that plane of the hemisphere fell down amazed. Have we ever rent the air with our cries and shouts of delight and thankfulness? Our Christianity may have been formal, and our atheism may have been the atheism of respectability. Respectability can never be earnest. It is limited by a smaller word. If Sydney Smith said the Church is dying of dignity, we may apply the rebuke to ourselves, and ask if we are not falling into torpor through the opiate of respectability. Are we called to silence? Who can describe the feeling of those who were imprisoned during the Indian Mutiny? Is there not a page in the history of that rebellion which makes every human heart thrill with excitement? We remember how the Europeans were shut up, being beleaguered and invested, and within a hand-breadth of extinction; and we remember hearing of the deliverers' approach, and of those who were suffering catching the strains of music; they heard the pibroch and the slogan, and their hearts came again, and every soldier was a hero and every woman a saint; and as the deliverers came on, could you have said to those who had been shut up in terror and darkness, Now restrain yourselves; avoid everything sensational, and maintain a decorous and proper attitude in all things—what answer would they have returned to your inane and unseasonable address? We must pass through a certain class of circumstances before we can understand the feelings of those who express gratitude for deliverance. The singing of the Church should be loud, joyous, and sweet; all instruments should accompany it: now the clash of bells, now the blare of trumpets, now the lilt of lutes, and now the throb of drums; strong men, gentle women, merry children should unite their voices in one glad burst of religious joy. Thank God for music. That will unite the Church when theology will divide it. There is no disputable argument in music. The vanity of opinion is not touched by music. The demon of heresy is left without a chance in music. Pedantic criticism is ignored. The heart has it all its own way. All is harmony. All is praise. All is love. If ever preaching be displaced or superseded, may it be by music!

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, enable us so to read the story of the past as to know somewhat of thy government, and amend our own ways before thee. Thou hast thyself been writing the story of the earth, and within and without it is written all over with mourning, lamentation, and woe. It is a scroll we would not willingly open but for the writing of God which is in it, which tells of hope and peace and rest, which reveals an eternal gospel—righteous, loving, infinite. For thine own gospel we search the Book: the human story we would not read; it is full of evil and mockery, sin and shame, wrong-doing and selfish penitence: our prayers have related to ourselves, and have sought rather to improve our position than to vindicate eternal righteousness. Now that we come to the story do thou come with us, that we may read it aright, find out all the music that is in it, all the wisdom with which it is laden, and all the hope with which it is inspired. Thus shall we read to our souls' profiting, and when we rise from the perusal of the page we shall feel that we ought to pray some nobler prayer, burn with some guiltier shame, and seek with truest penitence to be forgiven all our sin. Where is the place of prayer but at the Cross of Christ? That is the sacred altar, that is the place where man never truly prayed in vain; the answer was given whilst the prayer was being breathed: may we now realise that in the very act of asking for pardon through the blood of the Lamb, the precious blood, we may be forgiven. Say, Son, thy sins which are many are all forgiven thee! Amen.

Chapters xiii., xiv.*

THE BURDEN OF BABYLON.

IT is well that there are some men who see what may be called the more majestic and overpowering aspects of God. Some of us are afraid almost to utter the great words which properly belong to the deity as descriptive of his nature and attributes and government. Herein what a wonderful difference there is between the Old Testament and the New, between the Hebrew and the Greek! Neither is sufficient alone: some men

* "All the rest of these chapters—xiv.—xxi. and xxiii.—refer to Isaiah's own day. They were delivered by the prophet at various times throughout his career; but the most of them evidently date from immediately after the year 705, when, on the death of Sargon, there was a general rebellion of the Assyrian vassals."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A.

never look at the sky ; they look only at the earth ; others are not satisfied with looking at what is under their feet, they must with eager yet reverent eyes search the mystery of the heavens. We need all kinds of revelation in order that we may approximate to an idea concerning God's nature, so wondrous, yet so simple ; so lifted up above all time and space as known to us, and yet walking by our very sides, and tabernacling within us as an invited guest.

This is called "The Burden of Babylon." Whenever we find the word *burden* in this association it means *oracle*, a speech of doom ; it is never connected with blessing, hope, enlarged opportunity, or expanded liberty ; it always means that judgment is swiftly coming, and may at any moment burst upon the thing that is doomed. "Which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see." We have ventured to lay it down that there is a genius of Biblical interpretation, that things are not to be taken always in their literal and most obvious and superficial sense. This doctrine cannot be proved by one single instance ; we must search the whole record in order to seize this doctrine as a possession which enables us to open many a door in the great wall, built of gold and jasper, of revelation. "Which Isaiah did see." How did he see it ? The word "see" needs to be defined every day. Blind men may see. We do not see with the eyes only, else truly we should see very little ; the whole body becomes an eye when it is full of light, and they who are holiest see farthest : "Blessed are the pure in heart : for they shall see God." Men see morally, intellectually, sympathetically, as well as visually. How could Isaiah see this burden of Babylon when it did not fall upon the proud city for two centuries ? Is there, then, no annihilation of time and space ? Are we the mean prisoners we thought ourselves to be ? is it so, that we are caged round by invisible iron, and sealed down by some oppressive power, or blinded by some arbitrary or cruel shadow ? We might see more if we looked in the right direction ; we might be masters of the centuries if we lived with God. Isaiah is never weary of saying that he *saw* what he affirms. He does not describe it as having been seen by some other man ; having written his record he signs it, or having begun to deliver his

prophecy he writes it as a man writes his will ; he begins by asserting that it is his testament, his own very witness, for he was there, saw it, and he accepts the responsibility of every declaration.

“Lift ye up a banner upon the high mountain” (xiii. 2). Does that mean geographically high? Not necessarily. Here again we have need to commit ourselves to the genius of Biblical interpretation. The high mountain is really a bare mountain, not bearded with a forest, not tufted with a few trees, with which the banner might be confused, but a bare, bald, rock-like height, where nothing is to be seen but the uplifted banner of God. Truly, in Christian warfare we might learn something from military enterprise. Have we put our banner in the right place? It is not enough to have a banner, we must be careful where we plant it; it may be mistaken for a tree, it may get entangled among the branches of great oaks or cedars: it is not enough to have a light, we must put it on the candlestick, and set it on the table, and not cover it with a bushel so that the darkness may be unrelieved by its presence: it is not enough to have intelligence, we must properly display it, use it for the benefit of those who are not so intelligent as we are: it is not enough to have schools, we must set the doors wide open, and compel the ignorant to enter that they may return from the sanctuary of wisdom instructed and mentally fortified: it is not enough to have a church, we must open every door and every window, and bid all the people welcome—the more wicked, the more welcome; the more ignorant, if willing to learn, the more desired with the solicitude of sympathy and interest.

“Shake the hand” (xiii. 2). Is that a common signification? Is it to be read as the words would be read to-day in describing social approaches and intercourses? The word is a military word, and it signifies an emphatic gesture of the hand, so that there may be no mistake as to the place indicated: the index-fingers seems long enough to reach the top of the mountain, and to point out the very locality which the banner is to occupy. In military exploits men are not afraid of emphasis: how much afraid we are of it in the Church! The children of this world

are wiser than the children of light. When men are determined upon conquering a position with guns and swords, they go about it as if they meant to conquer. How is the Church going about the conversion of the world to-day? Hardly going about the work at all, mumbling where it should roar, giving vague directions where it should give specific indications. Carlyle has said we are lost in many enterprises for want of emphasis. And there may be emphasis which is not properly distributed. We may be earnest about little things instead of great things: "Thy servant was busy here and there," and the king passed by; not, Thy servant was slothful, slumbering, but was busy "here and there," and it is impossible for any man to be busy both here and there. That is the difficulty of misdirected effort, ill-spent vigour, and vain earnestness, that men do not keep to the line, they are not found constantly at the point: they are preaching in Genesis in the morning and in Timothy in the evening; therefore the Bible is scattered, broken up; its continuity is lost, its pressure ceases to be one of the master-forces in life. Yet do not the people love the emphatic gesture, the soldier who knows the gate he means to take? Do they not applaud him in their journals, and celebrate him in their songs? Is it to be so, that only the Church is to be wanting in fervour, in military precision, in dignity and constancy, in warfare and instruction?

"That they may go into the gates of the nobles" (xiii. 2). The strongest gates are to be broken down. The great judgments of God do not seek little postern entrances; they are royal judgments, and must enter by royal ways. There are gates in parks and in castles which are only opened when the monarch approaches. God is the Monarch, and when he comes we must open the central gates—gates passed only by the nobles and the crowned ones of the land. "The nobles." Aristocracy, then, is of some antiquity; not by any possibility of such high antiquity as the common people. But the word "lord," as used in ordinary speech, is a word we would not willingly let die, if we could keep it to its first meanings. It comes by abbreviation from an old Saxon word, *laford*, and *laford* comes from an old Saxon verb which means to sustain, to succour. When our lords are succourers we will never violate their house, [meet

where they may. When the greatest are the kindest they can never be dispossessed. The time has come by the agency of Christian thought and sympathy when men must vindicate their claim to every primacy by their wisdom, their goodness, their fitness, their moral quality. To bring back words to their first meanings is like bringing back prodigals to their father's house, that they may have rings on their fingers, shoes on their feet, and be clothed with the best robe. Herein every one can have a great title. When the emulation is to exceed one another in kindness, charity, love, sympathy, then the world will be occupied by one class—by the very aristocracy of heaven.

Isaiah says (xiii. 5) : "They come from a far country, from the end of heaven." What a small solar system Isaiah had ! He had great advantages in his vision of the Eternal ; when he describes God we are touched by the majesty of his description ; but when he talks about "a far country" and "from the end of heaven" we long for some little boy of our own common schools to teach him a little about geography. This is good, and most helpful to a right interpretation of the Bible ; this brings us to its high point, to the things it means at all times and under all circumstances. This shows the fearlessness of truth ; it will occupy any instrument, or use any medium we can supply ; it attaches itself to the intelligence of the day, and uses that for purposes of enlightenment and progress. Who can tell where is the end of heaven ? The destruction which is to fall upon Babylon is to come as a destruction from the Almighty. Here is a curious play upon words, which, as the old commentators would say, cannot be Englished. The word "Almighty" here means "the destroyer." In the original language it is almost a pun, a play upon syllables and tones, "it shall come as a destruction from the destroyer." How seldom is the word "Almighty" used in connection with the tender aspects of the divine nature ; power would always seem to have been associated with thoughts of judgment, penalty, sovereignty of a stern and exacting kind. In this sense the word is found eight times in the Pentateuch, and twenty-three times in the Book of Job alone. All we can do with a prophecy of this kind is to find out its central principle, which belongs to all ages and to all countries. The prophecy brings God

before us as the God of nations. That is a thought which we seldom realise. We fix our unit in the individual. So does God, but he also uses the unit as descriptive of a totality. Babylon is a unit ; yea, Assyria, of which Babylon was part—the haughty capital—is a unit ; so Media, Egypt, Damascus, Syria. Always understand what the unit is that God is speaking about—sometimes an individual, sometimes a country, sometimes a world, sometimes the universe. A unit is more than one. It is one literally, but there may be a unit of simplicity and a unit of complexity. God handles the nations as single entities : Babylon counts one, Nineveh counts one, every nation is a one ; they are millions in the detail, but God lifts up the nation in its unity, examines it, judges it, sentences it, in its unity. Are we not accustomed to the same method of dealing with great questions ? Do we not invest a nation with a character ? How would the nation of the Jews have been described in olden times ? How would the health of England or America or any other country be now stated ? As if the country were but one individual. Who hesitates to speak about the function of a whole people, assigning one function to the Roman character, and a totally distinct function to the Greek instinct and culture ? We ourselves, therefore, speak as God speaks of nations in their unity. A very mysterious thought this, and full of urgent instruction and suggestiveness. A metropolis may be pronounced healthy, as we have already seen, when there are hundreds of dying men in it. So there are two standards of judgment, or two views and aspects, under which questions may be considered. Say, for example, London is the healthiest city in the empire. That might be met by the assurance that indisputable statistics prove that in London at the very time of the declaration of its healthfulness there are five thousand men whose lives are despaired of. Yet the statement regarding the sanitary condition of the metropolis may be perfectly right. So we speak of England, or some other country, being honest, inspired by a spirit of equity, or honour, or courage. When a country with such a character issues a loan, all the eagles of the earth come down upon it at once. Why ? Because of the character which lies behind. The word is the bond. If a country with a great character has made a proposal, the proposal will be carried out, come what may. Whoever,

therefore, helps the improvement of individual character, helps the elevation of all the best national characteristics. To work for a child is to work for the nation; to work in the Sunday-school is to amend the national reputation. Thus we operate together, and co-operate with God, and the great purpose is to turn the burden into a blessing.

God is also represented as the destroyer of nations—"Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt" (xiii. 7). How terrible is this! But this is not the worst. There is a purposed cruelty which the Almighty infuses into his judgments when he has to deal with a people like the cities of Babylon; he says: "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it" (xiii. 9). The word "cruelty" is not withheld. It may startle us and shock us until we come to the explanatory word, which is also to be found in the document. We must not stop at the adjective, we must go in quest of the substantive which has brought it into relation, and which it either qualifies or is explained by. Our inquiry must be: On whom will God visit a cruel judgment? And if the answer is, as it will be found to be in the succeeding chapter, we shall find that the words are well balanced, and that the way of the Lord is equal, and that the word "cruelty," which seems to be so undivine, is really the only word that could have been used with propriety and precision under circumstances so unparalleled and so exciting.

The destructions of the Lord will be executed on an infinite scale—"for the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine"; and God "will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir." How often is this text misunderstood! How many times has it been explained as meaning the value which God sets upon a man, or the value which man will one day set upon man, because of the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God. That thought itself is right, but it has no relation whatever to this particular text.

Let us read the text, then, in the light of the history. So tremendous and complete shall be the devastation that shall fall upon Babylon that it will be hardly possible anywhere to find a man, and his rarity shall indicate his preciousness. Because the men are so few the greater will be the surprise that they are in existence at all; for when God caused his scythe to swing through the harvests of Babylon it was not expected that a single ear would be left in the devastated field. Thus the utterance is a menace, a judgment; it is not part of a lecture upon the dignity of human nature, it is an illustration of the vastness of the sweep of the judgments of God. How complete is that devastation!

"And Babylon, the glory of the kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged" (xiii. 19-22).

You remember Milton's description of what happened at the time of the flood: "And in their palaces, where luxury late reigned, sea-monsters whelped and stabled." "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Oh, Babylon—Pride—where art thou when touched from above? The withering fire passes through all pomp until it burns the hidden root.

All this we may say is historical and local. On the other hand, all this is moral and suggestive. This process may take place in the Babylon of the mind. The greatest mind is only safe whilst it worships. The most magnificent intellectual temple is only secure from the judgment and whirlwind of heaven in proportion as its altar is defended from the approach of every unworthy suppliant. If we hand over God's altar, whether mental or ecclesiastical, to wrong custodians, or devote either to forbidden purposes, then make way for God's judgments: wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and the houses that were full of beauty and colour and charm shall be full of doleful creatures; and the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces. This may happen

to any one of us. Beware of arrogancy, pride, worldliness, self-sufficiency; beware of the betrayal of trusts: nature will re-enter if we be unfaithful. We speak of our wisdom in putting cautionary covenants into all our legal documents, and especially a man assures himself that he is doubly safe when he has secured the right of re-entry under certain breaches of agreement; he says to himself with complacency, That is justifiable; I have arranged that in the event of certain things failing I shall re-enter. Nature always puts that clause into her covenants. She re-enters in a moment. If the gardener is too late by one day with his spade or seed or other attention, nature begins to re-enter; and if he tarry for a week he will find that nature has made great advances into the property. It is so with education, with the keeping up of intelligence, with the maintenance of healthy discipline; relax a month, and nature re-enters, and nature plays the spoiler. Nature is not a thrifty, careful husbandman. Nature has a function of desolation; she will grow weeds in your richest flower-beds if you neglect them for a day. God re-enters by the spirit of judgment and by the visitations of anger. Herein his providence is but in harmony with the kingdom which he has instituted within the sphere which we call husbandry, and even within the sphere which we denominate by education or discipline. It is one government. Neglect your music for a month, and you will find at the end that nature has re-entered, and you are not wanted; you have not brought with you the wedding-garment of preparation up to date. There must be no intermission; the last line must be filled in. Nature will not have things done in the bulk, in the gross; nature will not allow us simply to write the name; she will weave her webwork all round the garment if we have neglected the borders, and paid attention to only the middle parts.

And how does God justify all this treatment of Babylon? We find the answer in the fourteenth chapter; he says the Babylonians were oppressors, and Babylon was an oppressor, and Babylon was the staff of the wicked. That is the explanation, and God's explanation is always moral. God never judges men because they have been good, nor smites them because of overmuch prayer; wherever we find the record of judgment we find a

record of disobedience, rebellion, haughtiness. How terrible is the fate of the wicked ! He shall be mocked in his later time ; they who were already on the ground shall receive him on the dust, and say :—

“All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we ? art thou become like unto us ? Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols : the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee. How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning ! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations ! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God : I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north : I will ascend above the heights of the clouds ; I will be like the most High ” (xiv. 10-14).

Now we see the quantity with which God had to deal, and also the justice of his judgment and the wisdom of the very cruelty which plagued an arrogancy which nothing else could touch. You do not appease a tiger by sprinkling scented water upon his open mouth. You must deal with cases as you find them, taking a complete measure of them, and understanding all the forces in them and exercised by them ; and so judged it will be found that God, whilst a consuming fire, is also a God of love. The eye that looked upon the Egyptians struck off the iron wheels of their chariots : that same eye, looked at from the position occupied by Israel, made morning and warmth and comfort and security infinite. God is to us what we are to God : to the froward he will show himself froward ; to the good he will show himself good. This is the abiding and the unchangeable law. If we were wise with the superior—yea, the supreme wisdom—we should consider that the first thing to be done is to set ourselves in a right relation to God ; then all the other relations will fall into their proper place. A quaint old critic has said that if the treble string of the viol be right, he knows that the rest will be right : the bass seldom gets wrong ; he looks for the treble string. Out of that we may gather some lessons of a spiritual kind. Look for the religious line in a man's character—for his veneration, his reverence, his sense of moral dignity and moral responsibility ; and if his heart be right toward God he may have his little eccentricities and vanities, but all these will sink into nothingness before the power that can pray, and before the passion that can love.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, thou hast promised that death shall be swallowed up in victory. Thou canst not bear death. There is no death in God. The wages of sin is death : but thanks be unto God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thy Son hath abolished death, obliterated it, wiped it out, turned it into nothingness. The broad river is narrow now ; men need not pass through it, they can step over it. How near is heaven ! how close at hand the invisible ! how all but within hand-reach all that we call heaven ! We bless thee that in this little life we have hope of immortality. Corruption is not a constant companion. We look for the Lord Jesus, who shall change our common body and make it like unto his own glorious body ; then when our citizenship in heaven is completed we shall walk with the saints in light, and do all thy will without reluctance and without weariness. These great anticipations make us strong even now, so that the valley is as a mountain, and the rough place as a road smoothed by God. Such are the miracles thou dost work in our consciousness and our experience, that we have no apprehension of time and space and sense and imprisonment and limitation, but are oftentimes with thy very self in the innermost, uppermost places, where the light never fades. We bless thee for all men who have gone down into the depths valiantly, who have sung in the deep places the song of the redeemed, and who have sent us messages in whispers that the rod and the staff of God can comfort the lone traveller in the darkest valley. This is enough. We are often affrighted, we carry our anticipated death like a burden and die many deaths even whilst we live ; but for all sweet messages, all comforting assurances, all inspiring words, all exceeding great and precious promises, we thank God, for they are God's word only. Grant us strength that we may do thy will ; when we have accomplished thy purpose in our life upon the earth make the last time brief, and let us see our Lord, if it please thee, even with somewhat of suddenness. We pray always at the Cross. It is the altar on which no prayer dies, but every prayer is multiplied a thousandfold because of the pleading blood, the infinite, the eloquent Sacrifice. Amen.

Chapters xv., xvi.

THE CORE OF PROPHECY.

THE fifteenth and sixteenth chapters give "the burden of Moab ;"* then follow the burdens, or oracles, of Damascus,

* Isa. xv., xvi. 12. ORACLE FOR MOAB.—A long prophecy against Moab. This oracle, whether originally by himself at an earlier period of his life, or more

Ethiopia, and Egypt. We have thus to deal with a vision which looks out upon all directions with a judgment which permits nothing to escape its scrutiny and verdict. The principle of prophecy is the same throughout; for want of applying this doctrine many men have become lost in prophetic detail and colour which really have next to nothing to do with the very core of the prophecy. All prophecy must be reduced to the action of a common principle, namely, that "righteousness exalteth a nation," and that sin is a disgrace to any people. This message will of course be delivered by the various prophets with such illustrations as express individuality of genius, culture, and situation. We are apt, however, to be lost in the midst of the illustrations, and to forget that every one of the prophets has but a single message to deliver. It is the same also with all theological discourses and exhortations. All the sermons that have ever been preached are reducible to a few pages of written matter. The preacher really has nothing to say except that God wishes men to return to him, and that men, having returned to him, will be cultivated and strengthened in all righteousness and beneficence of disposition. We thus understand the meaning of the statement, "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and

probably by an older prophet, Isaiah adopts and ratifies, and intimates its immediate fulfilment in xvi. 13, 14. The dates both of the original publication of this prophecy and of its re-issue with the appendix are quite uncertain. The latter may fall about 711, when Moab was threatened by Sargon for complicity in the Ashdod conspiracy; or in 704, when with other states Moab came under the cloud of Sennacherib's invasion. The main prophecy is remarkable for its vivid picture of the disaster that has overtaken Moab, and for the sympathy with her which the Jewish prophet expresses; for the mention of a *remnant* of Moab; for the exhortation to her to send tribute in her adversity *to the mount of the daughter of Zion* (xvi. 1); for an appeal to Zion to shelter the outcasts of Moab, and to take up her cause—*Bring counsel, make a decision, make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the outcasts, bewray not the wanderer*; for a statement of the Messiah similar to those in chaps. ix. and xi.; and for the offer to the oppressed Moabites of the security of Judah in Messianic times (vers. 4, 5). But there is one great obstacle to this prospect of Moab lying down in the shadow of Judah—Moab's arrogance. *We have heard of the pride of Moab, that he is very proud* (ver. 6, cf. Jer. xlviii. 29, 42; Zeph. ii. 10), which pride shall not only keep this country in ruin, but prevent the Moabites prevailing in prayer at their own sanctuary (ver. 12)—a very remarkable admission about the worship of another god than Jehovah."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A.

to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" That is to say, all criticism, all experience, all religious reflection may be summed up in this practical discipline. The same principle may be discovered in the economy of nature. We look out upon the landscape and see trees and flowers and meadows in a thousand various colours and forms, yet the whole of that abundance is reducible to a handful of seeds. It is important to remember all this, because we may actually miss the very point of the prophecy in the act of looking too closely into it. As we have often seen, this is the continual temptation, namely, that men are drawn away to the study of phenomena, illustration, or outward adornment, and thus are likely to neglect the inner and central meaning of the very things on which they are expending so much care. Take the parable of the Prodigal Son : we do not find the meaning of that parable in the fatted calf, the best robe, the ring for the hands or the shoes for the feet, or in the music and dancing ; behind all these things lies the real meaning of the parable, namely, that a heart has accused itself of sin, and has come back to make its supplication to the offended father. That is all. That, indeed, is enough. It admits of amplification as an acorn does, but the amplification is not the parable in its kernel or essence ; and it is perfectly possible to be looking at all the decoration, and admiring it from a merely literary aspect, and yet wholly to overlook the evangelical purport of the portrayal. When all prophecy is stripped of its accessories it simply comes to this : Say ye unto the righteous, It shall be well with him ; and say unto the wicked, It shall be ill with him. God charges every prophet and apostle to deliver this message, but he allows prophet and apostle to choose their own way of doing so : they may amplify, or colour, or enlarge, or assert themselves in any legitimate way, so as to increase their emphasis ; but they are never to forget that they have only one thing to say, and that is that God approves righteousness, and regards sin as an abominable thing. Thus the subject divides itself into two parts, first, the thing that is said, which is all-important ; and, secondly, the manner in which it is said, which is secondary, though most useful. The prophets sought to impress the people through the medium of the imagination ; the apostles sought to turn conscience into an instrument by which they could most effectively deliver the divine

message, or discharge themselves of their holy responsibilities. Memory may be worked upon; all the images and interests of childhood may be summoned to the prophet's aid; imagination may be so fired as to see ruin upon ruin coming swiftly in the track of sin; or persuasion may be employed for the purpose of luring the mind and heart back again to forsaken ways. In the choice of instruments, in the method of working, God allows the largest liberty to his prophets and apostles; but they are never to forget that they have only one thing to say, and that is, with the righteous it shall be well, and though hand join in hand the wicked shall not prosper. Looked at in the light of this principle, all these burdens or oracles are greatly simplified. We have next to nothing to do with the mere detail, yet even that detail may in some instances be useful for illustrative or confirmatory purposes. When we have read the pompous rhetoric, we have to ask ourselves the question, What does it all come to? and the answer to that enquiry is direct and simple, namely, it comes to this, that he who honours God shall be honoured, and whoso despises God shall be lightly esteemed,—that is to say, shall be cut off, and driven away as with a whirlwind of contempt.

Let us now turn to the words of the prophet, and see how God acts in the matter of judgment and doom, so far as his method is revealed, or is illustrated by these most striking instances.

“The burden of Moab. Because in the night Ar of Moab is laid waste, and brought to silence; because in the night Kir of Moab is laid waste, and brought to silence” (xv. 1).

Here we see what havoc is wrought in the night-time. In the night Kir of Moab is laid waste, and brought to silence; Mesha, king of Moab, boasted that he had taken Nebo by a night attack. The prophet refers to a castle on a hill which rises a thousand feet above the Dead Sea, and which was recognised as the strongest of the Moabite fortresses, and that castle is represented as having been attacked at night when resistance was most hopeless. We have seen again and again how God works in the night-time. Man has but a little day to work in, but God's working hours never cease; man becomes weary with his day's work, and lies down to rest, and whilst he is in slumber destruction swiftly

overtakes him, so that the morning looks out upon a branch cut off, a city laid to waste and brought to silence. These are the perplexing events of life. What we can see and measure and understand may afford us an opportunity of treating with some measure of success; but when the darkness closes upon us, and we are imprisoned within its boundless walls, we know not from what quarter the enemy may come, or at what rate the dart is flying. Men should diligently consider this in musing upon the judgments of providence. They cannot always be awake, they cannot always be upon the walls defending the fortress; they must retire for a time to renew their strength, and whilst they are resting the enemy acquires additional power, and comes down upon their boasted masonry, and hurls it to the dust. Only the Christian man has confidence in the night-time. He says, *He that keepeth me will not slumber nor sleep.* God is against evil-workers, and it delights him to trouble them by nightly visits, so that in the morning they cannot recall their own plans and purposes, or give an account of that which has happened whilst their eyes have been closed in sleep. Are we only safe so long as we can use our own eyes and hands? Have we any safety in the darkness? Have we made no provision for the night-time? If not, then woe will fall upon us, and when the morning comes it will rise upon a scene of desolation. Remember what God said to the fool in the parable who was counting his riches, and forecasting the happy years which his soul was to enjoy—"Thou fool! this night thy soul shall be required of thee." Ponder deeply upon the moral of Night; the darkness should instruct us, remind us of our exhaustion, helplessness, and dependence upon others for security and rest, and should above all things lead us to put our confidence in him to whom the darkness and the light are both alike.

"He is gone up to Bajith, and to Dibon, the high places, to weep: Moab shall howl over Nebo, and over Medeba: on all their heads shall be baldness, and every beard cut off. In their streets they shall gird themselves with sackcloth: on the tops of their houses, and in their streets, every one shall howl, weeping abundantly" (xv. 2, 3).

We have a picture of men going to old altars, and finding there nothing but silence. Bajith may be regarded as the temple of the Moabite god. The prophet sees men terror-stricken

joining in solemn procession, and going up to the temples of their gods that they may seek relief for their heartache and bewilderment. The Nebo which is mentioned in the text is not the mountain which bore that name, but a city named after the same deity. Mesha boasted of having taken Nebo, and slain there some seven thousand men. The point, however, with which we have to deal is that men go up to temples and altars, and where they expected companionship and music they find desertion and silence. The sorrow of those who mourn is represented by a very graphic figure—"on all their heads shall be baldness, and every beard cut off." The primary reference is probably to some sacrificial ceremony. At a very early period baldness was regarded as a symbol of intensest sorrow amongst Eastern nations. Baldness was forbidden to Israel, for the probable reason that it was identified with the sacrificial worship of heathen deities. The picture of lamentation is continued in the third verse. In Eastern countries, when men were afflicted with great sorrow, they betook themselves to the flat roofs of their houses, and there publicly and loudly wailed on account of their agony. So they were reduced to a state of helplessness; their very gods had forsaken them, and had thus revealed their own character as deities. It is under such circumstances—namely, of desertion and sorrow—that men find out what their religion is really worth. The Lord taunts all the heathen nations because their gods forsook them in the hour of calamity. One prophet exclaims, "Thy calf hath cast thee off, O Samaria." The Lord himself is represented as going up and down throughout the temples of heathenism, mocking and taunting the gods with which they were filled, because they were merely ornamental or decorative gods, and were utterly without power to assuage the sorrow of the human heart. Whilst, however, all this is true of heathenism, there is a sense in which even Christian men may go back to old altars and find them forsaken. The Lord, the living One, the Father of the universe, is not pledged to abide at the altar for ever to await the return of the prodigal. In the very first book of the Bible we read, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." There is a day of grace, so measurement can be determined with sufficient nearness to excite alarm, lest its golden hours should be lost. When the door is once shut it will

not be opened again. Men may so live that when they go to the sanctuary itself, where the sweetest gospel is preached in all its purity and nobleness, they find no comfort in the place that is devoted to consolation. The fault is to be found in themselves; they have sinned away their opportunities, they have enclosed themselves within walls of adamant, they have betaken themselves to the worship of their own vanity and the pursuit of their own selfish purposes, so that when they return to the house of God they find that the Lord has abandoned his temple. A graphic and humiliating picture is this, that men shall go up and down the church, and it shall be unto them as common ground; they shall call unto God out of their distress, and shall be answered only as with a burden of silence; they shall cry for light, and in reply to their invocation the darkness shall become sevenfold.¹ None can withdraw so far as God. When he goes no one can cause him to return; the soul is, so to say, afflicted with a sense of vacancy, and the very emptiness into which it pours its prayer becomes an aggravation of its mockery and distress: "They shall call upon me, and I will not answer." This is more than silence; it is silence aggravated, silence intensified, silence increased into burdensomeness. Preachers have no pleasure in dwelling upon these most distressing judgments; they only use them as the terrors of the Lord ought always to be used, as the basis of persuasive exhortation: Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?

"Therefore the abundance they have gotten, and that which they have laid up, shall they carry away to the brook of the willows. For the cry is gone round about the borders of Moab; the howling thereof unto Eglaim, and the howling thereof unto Beer-elim" (xv. 7, 8).

The picture is one of increasing distress. Abundance itself is made into a sign of poverty. The picture is that of men who are flying for their lives, and the fugitives take with them all they can gather together of household goods and other property, and bear it away in their trembling hands. This they were to carry away to the brooks of the valleys, to the torrent of the poplars some say, to the Arabians others, and to the wilderness others again. This was the point at which the fugitives passed the boundary of their own lines. Certain critics have said that the allusion to the Euphrates, which some have supposed to find

here, is merely poetical. Whatever the particular local interpretation may be, we have to deal with the fact that God causes sorrow upon sorrow to fall upon those who have broken his covenant and neglected his altar. The prophet represents the cry as having gone round about, reaching on the one side to Eglaim (two pools), and on the other to Beer-elim (the well of the Terebinths). The meaning would seem to be that the cry filled the whole circuit, and was indeed a wail of uttermost distress and loneliness. The cry of the heart in its bitterest hours may be said to reveal an aspect of religious instinct which is characteristic of human nature. A sense of orphanage afflicts the soul, and overwhelms it: the universe seems to be empty: the very largeness of the liberty which is thus given to the creature to roam through an empty universe distresses him beyond endurance; could he but find a companion, could he overtake a friend, could he awaken an echo; but on he goes through world after world, and finds nothing but forsakenness, silence, desolation!

"Send ye the lamb to the ruler of the land from Sela to the wilderness, unto the mount of the daughter of Zion" (xvi. 1).

The peculiar expression of this verse has been regarded as referring to the practice of the Moabites in the days of Mesha, their king. This king of Moab had paid a tribute of sheep and lambs to the king of Israel, of which we read in 2 Kings iii. 4; when Mesha revolted the tribute ceased. The prophet is here regarded as calling on the Moabites to renew their tribute, but not to the northern kingdom, which was on the point of extinction, but to the king of Judah, as the true ruler of the land: "Send ye the lamb"—send ye the tribute—restore the custom of ancient times. The word "Sela" means rock, and may refer either to the city called Petra, or generally to the rock district of Edom and the confines of Moab. One critic has said, "In either case the special direction implies that the presence of the invaders described in chapter xv. would make it impossible to send the tribute across the fords of the Jordan, and that it must accordingly be sent by the southern route, which passes through Sela and the desert country to the south of the Dead Sea."

"For it shall be, that, as a wandering bird cast out of the nest, so the daughters of Moab shall be at the fords of Arnon" (xvi. 2).

The margin renders the expression, "as a wandering bird cast

out of the nest"—"the forsaken nest." "The daughters of Moab" may either mean the women who were driven from their homes, or the whole population of towns and villages fluttering like birds in terror because their nests are spoiled, or like fledglings, not knowing, when their nest has been disturbed, whether to attempt to return to it or seek for themselves a new home. The picture represents the distress and bewilderment of the wrong-doer. He does not know whether to go back to the old door and knock at it in the hope that it may be opened to him again by some kindly hand, or to flee away into the land of darkness and silence: "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked." When the wicked man sits down, he fears that he may fall into perdition; when he goes abroad, he is alarmed lest a lion should confront him; when he speaks, he is afraid that he should awaken a foe; when he holds his tongue, he is sure that his silence will be interpreted as a token of guilt: he lives a troubled life: all nature is against him, in its countless ministries and criticisms and judgments; and this is because the man is against himself, not having a friend in his own heart or a sympathiser in his own memory.

"Take counsel, execute judgment; make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the outcasts; bewray not him that wandereth. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, Moab; be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler: for the extortioner is at an end, the spoiler ceaseth, the oppressors are consumed out of the land. And in mercy shall the throne be established: and he shall sit upon it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging, and seeking judgment, and hasting righteousness" (xvi. 3-5).

The moral purpose of judgment is never concealed in the divine writings. God is always seeking to bring about the time when in mercy his throne shall be established, and when there shall sit upon it in truth one who will represent the ideal judgment and blessing of God. The fifth verse might be rendered, "In mercy shall a throne be established, and one shall sit upon it in truth." The prophet has constantly kept before his mind the image of an ideal king. The ideal was partially fulfilled in Hezekiah, yet only partially; the prophet was sure one was coming who would fulfil it in its utmost meaning, and he steadfastly kept his eye on the bright day when God's throne should be established among the nations, and his sceptre should be

extended over all. God does not exist merely to destroy, nor does he rule only in order that he may humble and crush ; his purpose is one of equity, righteousness, blessing, cultivation ; he seems to edify the universe, to build it up, and make it stronger and stronger, and not to exercise his almightiness in merely changing its relations and humbling its ambitions. God may be said to be presiding over a complicated process of evolution, the purpose of that evolution being not to destroy, but to complete, to bring to maturity, and ripeness, and fruition, although in the process there must be a good deal of loss and off-shedding ; but the great object of even that aspect of the divine economy is that that which remains shall be purer and stronger. Let us take this view of revolutions, tumults, wars, and all manner of national and international uproar and dislocation. When we count the killed and the wounded, when we estimate the cost of the battle, and the losses of all kinds which it inflicts, never let us withdraw our vision from the sublime purpose which providence is assuredly bringing about ; the process is indeed disastrous—in many instances, indeed, it is simply diabolical ; in nearly all its aspects it ought to awaken horror and shame, and indeed it would be intolerable but for the assured confidence that the end will show that God has been in the matter establishing a kingdom of righteousness, and destroying an empire of darkness. It is long to wait for the issue ; the night always seems longer than the day when men are in trouble and perplexity ; if we lose our religious faith under such circumstances, then we shall never see the morning of explanation and peacefulness, but shall go down amid the darkness and thunders of the night. My soul, hope thou continually in God : clouds and darkness are round about him, righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne : in all things he is making a way for himself ; terrible, indeed, are the disasters which follow upon wickedness, yet if they could be lessened by one, or could be mitigated by any consolation that impaired the righteousness of God, they would be increased sevenfold.

‘Therefore I will bewail with the weeping of Jazer the vine of Sibmah : I will water thee with my tears, O Heshbon, and Elealeh : for the shouting for thy summer fruits and for thy harvest is fallen. And gladness is taken away, and joy out of the plentiful field ; and in the vineyards there shall be

no singing, neither shall there be shouting: the treaders shall tread out no wine in their presses; I have made their vintage shouting to cease. Wherefore my bowels shall sound like an harp for Moab, and mine inward parts for Kir-haresh" (xvi. 9-11).

All gladness is stopped. The prophet himself begins to weep "with the weeping of Jazer"—that is, with tears as genuine as Jazer itself. There is to be a "shouting for thy summer fruits"—better rendered, "on thy summer fruits and on thy harvest a shout is fallen"; that is to say, not the shout of those who gather the vintage, and delight in the abundance of the wheatfields, but the malignant shout of the foe as he rushes upon the property of those against whom he is fighting, and rejoices to have captured their bread and their wine from them. The word "harvest" may be regarded as used comprehensively as including the vintage. Note the disastrous picture—"gladness is taken away, and joy out of the plentiful field; and in the vineyards there shall be no singing, neither shall there be shouting; the treaders shall tread out no wine in their presses; I have made their vintage shouting to cease." The work of desolation, though carried out by human hands, is represented as having been accomplished by God himself. The prophet is given to understand, and indeed he himself avows the fact, that whilst he cries over the desolation of others with true human sympathy and pity, the divine righteousness is revealed in that very desolation. We cannot even accept the terrible judgments of God without evincing human emotion. We are nowhere called upon so to exhibit religion as to rejoice in the judgments of others, and withhold our tears from their sufferings.

We have all this vividly and pathetically set forth in the case of Jesus Christ in his relation to Jerusalem: "When he came near the city he wept over it." His tears did not interfere with the issue and consummation of judgment, yet the man could not look upon the scene without a sense of heartbreak, for Jerusalem had killed the prophets, and stoned them that were sent unto her, and she knew not the day of her visitation. When we see men taken away by the hand of the law, sentenced to lifelong imprisonment or sentenced to death, we may know that the sentence is just, and that no other sentence could have been

equitably pronounced; and yet we follow them with unutterable painfulness of heart, because of what they might have been had they known the day of their visitation, had they seen the door of their opportunity, and had they been faithful to their divine stewardship. Thus God himself may be said to be weeping over those upon whom he has pronounced the sentence of eternal punishment. These are great mysteries, and are not to be explained adequately in words; we can only see somewhat of their meaning in the deepest experiences of our own life.

How awfully the judgments of God fall upon one another! Even whilst God's heart sounds like a harp, because of his pity for those who suffer, still the judgment is not withheld, for it is due to the rest of the universe as well as to Jehovah himself that righteousness should be vindicated. The glory of Moab was condemned. History is silent as to the manner of the fulfilment of the prophecy. We know that the armies of Shalmaneser, or Sargon, swept as those of Pul and Tiglath-pileser had done over the region east of the Jordan, and so invaded Moab. The remnant was to be very small and feeble. It was not to be like the remnant of Israel which was the pledge of renewed strength; it was to be rather a symbol of utterest destruction and contempt; a reduction which meant a humiliation, a bringing-down to the extremest point of depletion, and leaving it there as a continual type of divine indignation. In the case of Damascus (xvii. 6), gleaning grapes were to be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches. The glory of Jacob was to be made thin, that is to say, was to be impoverished. The conqueror was to plunder the cities of Israel, after the manner in which the reaper cuts off the ears of corn. The prophet had probably often looked upon the reapers' work in the valley of Rephaim or the valley of the Giants,—a valley famous for its fertility, and therefore often attacked by the Philistines,—and as he looked upon the Philistines cutting down the ample harvest, he found in their action a type of the way in which the Assyrian invader would accomplish his unholy purposes. Yet the prophet cannot give up the idea of a remnant. Something was to be left out of which a renewal was surely to

come. First there was a beating, and then there was a shaking ; but even after that he saw a few berries on the topmost bough. Then come words which are at once pregnant with warning as well as promise—"At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images." The prophet prophesied their return to the true faith of Israel, but that was to be brought about by a bitter experience of the results of idolatry ; men were to see how helpless were the idols they had worshipped, and yet how exacting, and in their distress and confusion were to cry out for the living God. The people were reminded in words full of pathos of their unfaithfulness—"Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips. . . . But the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow." Thus God mocks the labours of those who imagine that nature is on their side, and that nature will after all supply them with a bountiful harvest. God allows men to toil in the seedtime, to plough the land and sow the seed, and make all preparations for a rich return ; and for a time it seems as if nature would be genial and kindly, and reward the toil of their hands ; but in the day when there should be a harvest they find grief, and in the time when there should be shouting because of the vintage they find desperate sorrow. Thus we come upon fundamental principles once more : say ye to the righteous, It shall be well with him ; say ye to the wicked, It shall be ill with him : though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not prosper : there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked : the way of transgressors is hard ; these are the simple sententious truths which are amplified by poetic genius, and which are enforced by many a noble appeal. It does us good to revel in the sublime rhetoric of prophetic imagery and expostulation, and it also does us good to come back from all the thunder of eloquence, and to listen to the judgments of God in their simplest and sternest tones.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we are all thine, for thou didst make us, and not we ourselves. We are the work of thy hands, we embody the thought of thy wisdom and love: are we not all made in the image and likeness of God? Thou knowest us altogether, and thou hast made replies to our need, for thou didst first create the hunger: blessed are they who hunger and thirst after the right things, after God, after rest; for they shall be filled; thou hast so made thy universe as to fill those who love thy law. Oh that we had hearkened to thy commandments! oh that we had walked in thy precepts, and made thy statutes our songs in the house of our pilgrimage! for then had our peace flowed like a river, and our righteousness had been as the waves of the sea. We bless thee that we know our shortcomings; thus we begin our penitence. Shame us into contrition; show us, thou Holy Spirit, what we might have been if we had followed in obedience and trust all the way of the living God; break us into utterest humiliation, and when thou hast thus subdued us and overwhelmed us and made us feel the agony of shame, then begin to comfort us with the Cross, with the gospel, with the agony of Christ, with the triumph and majesty of God the Son. Work in us all the good pleasure of thy will; give us to feel the thong of discipline, the laceration of judgment, and then leave us to healing and recovery and redemption, and all that is meant by motherliness and new birth and growth in life and love. Thou knowest us altogether, our need, our ambition, our desire, our hope; thou knowest the roots of our prayer, thou understandest the motive of our worship; yea, before our thought is shaped into speech, thou knowest it altogether. Then dwell with us according to thine own knowledge; judge us not with great rebukes, for who can stand before frowning heaven? but draw us near to the Cross, near to thyself, thou ever-healing Christ, and speak comfortably to us that we may become young and glad again. Make us all like little children; may we look wonderingly up into heaven until the star guides us to Bethlehem; when we are there we shall not stop short of Calvary. Let the Lord hear our prayer, and send us great answers of peace. Amen.

Chapter xvii. 1-6.

THE BURDEN OF DAMASCUS.

"Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city" * (ver. 1).

DAMASCUS never dreamed this desolation. Men seldom do dream the wisest things. They have debased dreaming

* "xvii. 1-11. ORACLE FOR DAMASCUS.—One of the earliest and most crisp of Isaiah's prophecies. Of the time of Syria's and Ephraim's league against Judah, somewhere between 736 and 732."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A.

into nightmare. Damascus was the fair metropolis of Syria ; she said, I shall always be clothed in purple and fine linen ; the course of Damascus is a course of ascent and ever-increasing illumination. When cities do not pray they go down. The city as a whole may not pray, but there are praying souls in it, and because of those praying souls the pride of the city is not stained by the Almighty. Still the ten save the city ; still one wise man saves the city ; still the little child is the lightning-conductor of the house : so God's lightning is harmless because the little child is there. The cradle saves the city. Think of possible degradation. Damascus shall be taken away from the roll of cities ; when the angels call the roll of the earth, they will never more say "Damascus." The alphabetic order will be inverted, the alphabetic status will be obliterated ; the proudest, fairest, queenliest city shall become a handful of ashes. Take care what you are about. London—great London—is nothing before him who sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and whose throne is upon the circle of heaven.

But we need not apply the doctrine to cities ; we must not escape by such generalities. It is possible for a man to moralise about the fate of a city, and forget that the principle of the text is aimed at all life. Life poorly handled means loss of life ; faculty fallen into desuetude means faculty fallen into death. You are now a great man : to-morrow you shall be taken away from the list of the living ; now men come to you as to a counsellor ; they propound their difficulties, they submit their plans and policies, and they invoke the aid of your solid and well-tested judgment. If you are proud of this you may before another sunset be a babbling idiot. God can do without you ; you are not indispensable to the universe. Be humble, meek of heart, lowly of spirit ; say that if you have a lamp that shines afar, and men call it genius, it was kindled by the divine hand for beneficent ends. We have nothing that we have not received. If we are bailiffs of large estates, the estates are not ours ; we must keep correct books, we must write up the story of every day, we must abide the coming of the auditor : it is expected of stewards that a man be found faithful. We have nothing to boast of ; our greatness is but a vapour, a poor blurred cloud, unless we hold it as

God's trustees, and are prepared to give an account at last of how we have used and expended every talent he gave us. Think nothing of earth's greatness. Damascus was taken away from being a city. God can disfranchise London, and Paris, and New York, and Constantinople. They are of no consequence to him, except as instruments carrying out his will, representing his kingdom, and doing his service in the world. What is true of cities is true of men. The moment you begin to hold your talents for yourself you begin to lose them. Understand this is not the fall of some little village; it was the fall of the Syrian capital that had lifted itself against Judah, that had joined rebellious Israel to stop the purposes of God. How bitter is the declaration! Damascus shall be disfranchised. Damascus shall have no vote. Damascus shall be turned into a cipher. Fair Damascus shall be a ruinous heap; men who knew her long ago shall come and seek her, and there shall be a mocking spirit in the air that shall say, She is there! Thrust your hand into these white ashes and find her if you can! She offended God, and God has decreed the punishment of obliteration upon her. We have all seen great men reduced to this littleness; we have seen great and pompous causes come to nothing: what is the reason of this? Because they have entered into false alliances, or have cultivated a spirit of rebellion, or have forgotten to pray. The disease is moral or spiritual; it is the heart that has gone down, and when the heart of a city or a man goes down in moral quality, in devout aspiration, then the sunshine is sucked out of the life, and the rest is night!

Read on; the threnody deepens in mournfulness: "The cities of Aroer are forsaken" (ver. 2). That would seem to be one of God's negative punishments. There is no violence inflicted upon the cities of Aroer; God simply turns away from them. God is God. Can the city thrive? It is thus that many a man is left. He is not cleft in twain, he is not smitten by some thunderbolt, and shattered into ten thousand atoms; he is simply left alone by his Maker. Saul was left alone; Saul said, Bring me up Samuel, I am forsaken of God. When a man is divinely forsaken he dips his pen to write in the old style of energy and luminousness, and behold there is no ink, or the pen is lost,

or the hand, poor old hand, has lost its cunning. What has happened? God has gone from the man; the man proved himself to be a liar, a thief, a hypocrite, a foul person, and the Lord, after much remonstrance and expostulation, has left him, and gone away—away. Let us take care what we are about. We do not hold even our character except under certain conditions which we may easily violate. You have built up your reputation these many years; it can be shattered in a moment. You cannot make a character in an hour; you may require fifty years to build one: but a single wrong act, and it is gone, and men would hesitate to tell where it once stood. You will ask them where, and they will become deaf; you will inquire for particulars, and they will look vacant: they are ashamed of the shattered memory. Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!

Yet God will make some use of the ground on which the cities of Aroer stood: "They shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid." Think of London a sheepfold! Think of what are termed the royal thoroughfares turned into sheepwalks! The Lord can better use his ground than allow the city to stand upon it any more; so he will call in the unoffending sheep, and let them pasture where princes ought to have been born, and kings ought to have walked in moral sovereignty. The earth is the Lord's. He will reclaim the places we have befouled. We shall give up to the lower creation the cities which we might have glorified.

Read on! "The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim" (ver. 3). He shall be an exposed personality. He shall not have a hiding-place; he who could once surround himself by what he thought to be invincible walls shall find himself quite exposed to all the assaults of the enemy; not a covering left, not a roof to his head, not a fire at which to warm his coldness. Ephraim would make alliance with Syria, and they would both go against Judah. Ephraim never made a great reputation; he was a cake unturned, a caked baked only on one side; and it is said of him, that Ephraim being armed and carrying bows turned back in the day of battle. When he was wanted he was not found; when he could have been of use he was taken sick. This is not

ancient history. This is the living story of the present day. When some men are wanted they cannot be found ; they afterwards come, and say that they ought to have been sought for. We have not time now to seek for men ; this is not a time to go after men, begging and beseeching them to do the Lord's work : men should come and ask for appointments, and submit themselves to service, and should gratefully and eagerly demand that they be put under the Lord's discipline. If any of you are making yourselves nuisances in your respective churches, sitting back and waiting to be called upon, holding yourselves in great esteem, as if you must be gone after, and deputationised, and be asked to confer upon the Christ the honour of your weakness,—take heed ! These are not times to play such devils' games : these are the times when men should spring to their feet and say, Make all the use of us you can ; and as for thee, thou crucified Saviour, the morning is thine and the night ; use us all the day long. Surely the time will come when we shall see virgin enthusiasm once more ; when we shall be startled by eager passion to do the Lord's work in the world. If not, our fortress will be taken from us, whatever our fortress is ; the child will be taken ; the money will be spent by a stranger's hand ; health will give way ; and the word which was once a security will become a jest. The Lord reigneth.

“And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin” (ver. 4). The literal rendering is, The glory of Jacob shall come to emaciation—all strength gone. You have seen the consumptive youth : is there any sadder spectacle on the face of this sad earth than that of a man who yesterday young and strong is now thin-fingered, gaunt, ghastly, coughing in his weakness ; his eyes too bright ; the blood all shrunk away ? He can hardly walk ; he hopes, he fears, he consults every one, for despair is not particular as to consultation : watch him ! That is what the glory of Jacob shall be like. The glory of Jacob shall be turned into emaciation : his face shall be blanched, his knees shall smite together, all his pride shall be withered up, and he who once lifted himself on high shall be smitten low, and none shall be able to tell his burial-place. The Lord reigneth.

And the judgment of God shall come down upon him—"And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim" (ver. 5). That valley was fruitful; it was called in the old time "The Valley of Giants." The Philistines kept their eyes constantly upon it, and when the chosen people held the valley, and when it was filled with corn, then the Philistines fell upon it and took it away. So shall it be with men who try contests with God, who invite the Lord to battle. You shall sow the corn, another hand shall reap it; you shall go to all the labour and the expense, but not one ear of grain shall you gather into your garner. This is the Lord's government; this providence: providence is judgment, judgment is providence: God is love: God is a consuming fire.

"Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the Lord God of Israel" (ver. 6). And it is against Israel that he is denouncing these judgments. He cannot get away from his own mercy. "Yet"—that is a gospel word; that is the nature of an anthem. There is the token of hope, the signal of possible deliverance and return and enfranchisement. Something shall be left. Just one or two little ears—multiply them by God's intention, and they shall become a harvest: "two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough"—take them down, multiply them by the purpose of the divine love, and they shall become as a field of fruitfulness. Is it not so with us? We have something left yet: the little child is left; the business is not wholly ruined; we have good health or good spirits; we have a friend or two here and there, kindly voices are not wholly dead: what is the meaning of these remnants of things? These remnants mean that God wants us home again; wants to see us in tears of penitence; wants to meet us at the cross of Christ; wants to reclaim us from the power and the captivity of the devil; wants to make us in very deed his own children; wants to recover us from our wandering, and set us like a fallen star in the brotherhood of the suns, to go out no more for ever. Return, O wanderer, to thy home!

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, as thou hast given to us full hands, so do thou grant unto us by thy Holy Spirit grateful hearts. Goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our life, now like spring, and now like harvest, and now like restful wintertime. Thou hast given unto us all things richly to enjoy : how can we enjoy the things made if we do not enjoy first the Maker thereof? We would look unto our Maker, and unto the Holy One of Israel, and we would connect all we have of earthly health and blessing with the Name Eternal, and with the Cross that signifies the love of God. We would not any more be thankless or heedless creatures ; we would that our hearts might be touched with the pathos of the Saviour's life and death ; we would see him in all gifts, in all opportunities for service, in all spheres of suffering. God forbid that we should be as the beasts of the earth, eating what thou hast sent, and forgetting the Sender. Thou dost give us our daily bread ; for us thou dost find pools and fountains in the desert : behold, all things are for our sakes, for we are made in the image and likeness of God. How can we praise thee ; what shall we render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward us ? We bless thee for fields laden with good things, for gardens and orchards that have brought forth abundantly. These are thy sanctuary, Lord ; thou hast a great dwelling-place ; thou hast not excluded thyself from the humblest corner of thy creation ; the meanest flower bears thy signature ; the tiniest, weakest life is a spark of thine own eternity. Make us solemn in the presence of all things, seeing that yet we do not know all their meaning or realise all their comfort. We bless thee for spring and summer, for harvest and winter ; these are parts of thy pledge and covenant to man : thou hast ever been faithful, we have often broken the vow. The Lord have mercy upon us when we humbly and contritely pour out our confessions at the Cross. Save us from saying, I have played the fool exceedingly ! for then should we be haughty and vain in our humiliation : help us rather to say, God be merciful to me a sinner ! then our hearts shall be emptied of self and of vanity and of foolish pride, and lying before the Cross, broken and shattered, we shall be healed and built up again. Help us to see thee in our personal lives, in the special providences which make up our individual history ; help us to see thee at home, the loved house, the little sanctuary, the miniature heaven ; help us to see thee in all the roughness and discipline of life, lest we think this is altogether the devil's world forsaken of God : thou canst not forsake any world that has carried the Cross. The Lord hear us, and increase us in wisdom and in understanding, in grace and in charity, in spirituality and hopefulness. The Lord

hear us for our loved ones, for the sick and the weary, for the children of night, for the bearers of cruel pain ; for all who are on the sea, for our loved ones far away and on the rolling billows, still one with us and thinking of us, as we are one with them and thinking of them : annihilate all space and time this holy Sabbath hour, and make us feel that all friends are near because Jesus is close at hand. Amen.

Chapter xvii. 10, 11.

"Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips : in the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish : but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow."

PENITENCE AND PUNISHMENT.

THAT is the loss we have all to mourn. Why do we grieve over merest trifles ? The thing to mourn over is spiritual loss, heart-alienation from God. We are given to tears : why do we not weep over the right causes ; why misspend our sorrows ? The literal, solemn, universal fact is that we have gone away from God ; then why cry about something secondary and superficial ? Why afflict ourselves about symptoms, whilst the cruel persistent disease is feeding on the vitals of our very heart ? Yet men will thus befool themselves to themselves and before God. How seldom it is that a man smites his breast, as did the contrite publican, and says, It is not providence that is awkward, it is not discipline that is severe, it is not the chain of events that is crooked or disentangled ; it is I that am wrong : my heart has gone astray from God ; I have forgotten to pray, I have forgotten to live upon heaven ; I have turned away from the Holy One, and fixed the attention of my heart upon altars which my own hands have made : I am a fool, I am a sinner : God pity me ; God be merciful to me a sinner ! That is fundamental talk ; that is coming to the root and core of things. If you are only whimpering about your symptoms, no good will come of it : hold God's burning candle over the pit of your heart, and see how deep and black that pit is, and then cry mightily to God to take you home again by the way of the Cross. Not until we get into this fundamental soliloquy, self-talk, shall we come to any good issue in religious inquiry, or in pious self-discipline.

Hear how the Lord talks ! He will smite the bodies of these God-forgetters. There is only one way of getting at some men. Once we could have appealed to their higher nature ; once they were subject to the pleasure and the eloquence of reason ; once they had a conscience tender, sensitive, responsive ; now they are spiritually dead, no conscience, no reason, no unselfishness ; the whole nature has gone down in volume and in quality into a terrible emaciation : what shall be done ? Smite their harvest ! then like beasts they will miss their food. God does not delight in this ; it is the poorest violence, it is the feeblest department of his providence ; but he knows that it is the only providence some men can understand. As long as they have their regular sustenance they will be fat atheists ; they must be hungered into reflection, they must be starved back into prayer. What mouth full of fatness can ask God's blessing on the food ? Take away the food, and the empty mouth may pray. God does not want to impoverish us ; it is not in the nature of God wantonly to take the roof off our house, and to pour the rain-floods down upon our fire and our hearthstone ; that is not the way of the heart of God. But having pleaded with us, and reasoned with us, yea, to agony ; having mightily desired our conversion and return and forgiveness ; having watched for us all the twenty-four hours of the day ; having lived for us and died for us, and sent for us by every angel-ministry at his command, and we will not come, what remains ? Starve them ! is the last resort of offended, dishonoured Providence. God thus takes away our health, and because of the soreness and weakness of the body we begin to wonder about the soul. That is God's meaning. It is nothing to God to crush your bones or to afflict your blood poisonously ; that gives him no pleasure : but that was the only way of bringing you to church, to the sanctuary, to consideration. You smote the heavens in your pride, and the heavens smote you in return, and then you began to say, What have I done ? and God told you what you had done ; you had forsaken the rock of your salvation, and gone away from your own faith and your father's faith, and the whole idea of fatherliness and redemption and destiny ; you had become atheists, godless ones, and that was the only way to bring you home again. He got you back to the Church through inflamma-

tion, through fever, through paralysis, through pain, through loss, through desolation; you came back over the graveyard. No matter, said God; when he got you into his house again he said, This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. It is in the reclamation, not in the punishment, that God takes pleasure. Curious words,—“penitence” and “punishment,”—etymologically growing out of the same root. Penitence and punishment—why, they seem to walk away from one another into opposite directions; so they may, but they belong to the same etymological root. When we begin to be punished God means us to begin to repent, and when we begin to repent the right way we begin to feel that the punishment is not arbitrary, but divine; and thus out of the same root grow very different flowers, yet the same in quality, and the same in their highest symbolism.

Notice the reasonableness of this course. God makes it a matter of argument; the Lord uses our little, logical, connective terms; he says “therefore,” and “because”; so we have it in this very instance—“Because thou hast forgotten . . . therefore.” This is reasoning together. God does not come before us and say, I will tell you nothing, you shall hear nothing of my reasons, I will afflict you from the point of my sovereignty, and not from the point of my Fatherhood. There shall be no condescension in this infliction of divine wrath: on the contrary, he says whilst his hand is lifted, This chastisement is “because.” Thus we, if in a right spirit, consent to our own punishment, the strokes of God, how terrible soever, being only too weak to represent even our own estimate of our base ingratitude. Who is it that has been forgotten? The Giver, the Father, the Servant of all. We have taken things as if we had a right to them. No man can so take things and enjoy them. When we pluck the flower by divine permission, oh, how fragrant, how sweet in wordless gospels, how beautiful in all discernible and undiscernible images! We may have grown the flower on our freehold or on our rented ground, but the earth is the Lord’s; the freeholder is only a tenant-at-will; it doth please his withering majesty to call himself freeholder; not an inch of all the great state is his but by secondary right and for purposes of

convenience. Having forgotten the Father, how can we expect to have harvest after harvest, as if we had remembered him in love, and honoured him in service? Men cannot trifle with the system within which they are placed and be held blameless. Let us understand more and more that we are members of a scheme, parts of a unity; that nothing is complete in itself, or self-ending; that every life palpitates with some other life and for some other life: thus, realising that we are parts of a plan, and not isolated individualities or particles, we shall feel that we cannot trifle with a divinely-constructed economy, and come out at the other end as if we had done nothing wrong. We have interfered with the whole machine. It may have been a very little wheel we have injured; but who can tell what a little wheel is in so complicated a piece of mechanism or organism as is this portion of creation within which we live? What are little wheels? It hath pleased God to turn little things to great purposes.

The one thing we have forgotten is that we are part and parcel of something else. There is no licentious liberty. A man cannot drink himself to death and be the only suffering party. You are wrong when you say that certain persons only injure themselves; it hath pleased God so to build the human universe that no man can injure himself without injuring other people. You may now be injuring posterity. Remember how sensitive are all human and vital relations. The drink you are taking into your blood now may turn some poor soul hellward a century hence; then the people will blame him, and call him fool, and reproach him, and shut him up in gaol, and sentence him to penal servitude or to the gallows. It is you, *you*, who ought now to be damned, but for the mercy of God. Thus circuitously but certainly God comes down upon us by way of judgment or by way of blessing; proving to us that no man liveth unto himself and no man dieth unto himself, that every life is of consequence to every other life in the universe. Can a watch break the mainspring and go on just as if nothing had happened? Can the clay mould itself into shape and beauty? Can the marble by some inward motion of its own throw off the burdens and accumulations that hide the beauty of chiselled

sculpture ? If a man cannot neglect his physical health without entailing suffering, how can a soul neglect its God and still enjoy his universe ?

Mark how life is based either upon infatuation or upon reason. Every man has some foundation for his policy and action in life. The Lord in this seventeenth chapter of Isaiah is very ironical and satirical, as we shall see. He says, "Therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips : in the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish." What mockery is like the sarcasm of heaven ? How bitter can the kind heavens be ! How terrible is the laugh of God ! The Lord will allow those who have left him to plant pleasant plants, to set them in a row, to build them on a terrace ; the seed shall flourish, and men shall say amid their pleasant plants and their strange slips, their exotics and their fine gatherings of slips and cuttings, Behold how these grow ! see, no blight falls upon them because of our spiritual rebellion ; we have done what we pleased with ourselves and before God ; lo, how kind the garden is to us : if God hath himself forsaken us the heavens smile and the earth brings forth abundantly—behold—behold ! Then the Lord says, "But." Oh that reservation of God, that parenthesis of providence, that interrupting, interpolating voice and mastery ! "But the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow" ; all your strange flowers and strange slips shall blossom and bloom but for one day ; in the morning the seed flourishes, the strange plants live one day. These occasional sun-gleams may foretoken the thunderstorm. God can mock, God can lead the bullock to the knife by way of a fat pasture. There is therefore a promise here, but the promise is limited. You shall have mushroom growths, you shall see wonderful things within the span of a single day ; but what shall the harvest be ? The meaning is, we may be infatuated by appearances, by immediate successes, by flowers and strange slips growing up within the compass of one little day, and we may say to ourselves, Behold, here is success : God has not rewarded us according to the brokenness of his law ; he has forgotten to reward us with shame and with disappointment. This, let us repeat, is the satire of

heaven. Give the ox six weeks of a thick pasture before the poleaxe ; let the culprit sleep well the night before the gallows ; let the atheist have one fat day, one gleesome festival ; let the rebellious have their mouths filled with meat, and whilst their teeth are still fastened upon the food I will smite them with pestilence and death. That is a tragedy ; that is the doom of heaven. We know you have your riches, you have your beautiful estates, you have your heavy balances at the bank ; we know that many things are growing round about you right luxuriantly ; but what shall the harvest be ? If a man will not ply himself with that question, and bring himself to answer it, he is a fool.

The harvest tries everything. The harvest is the end, the issue ; the harvest determines what it all comes to. Call no man happy until he is dead ; call no man a failure until his last effort has been made ; call no man rich who has only money ; call no man strong who has only a healthy body. Strength is a larger term than mere physical health, and wealth is a larger term than the mere possession of money. Oh, sons of men, what shall the permanent quantity be ? what shall the harvest be ? Is this severe ? No : it is righteous. It would be severe if it operated in one direction only. Happily, this is only one aspect of the divine government ; we are entitled to reverse this text, and say, Because thou hast remembered the God of thy salvation, and hast been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses burst out with new wine. Thou hast not withheld from God the gladness and the service of thine heart, and he will not withhold from thee the music and the rapture and the abundance of harvest. The way of the Lord is equal.

PRAYER.

FATHER of our spirits, teach us how near thou art. Once we thought thee afar off, because we ourselves were far off from thee: now we know that thou art near us, within us, and that we live, and move, and have our being in thee. Enable us to realise this more and more clearly, that we may draw from it all the infinite comfort with which it is charged; then shall we be at rest, and in the security of great peace we shall serve thee with a steadier will. Be within us as a light that does not dazzle, a fire that does not consume, a judgment that does not cast into despair. Make all the incidents of life helpful to our education; may we be wise men, noticing the times, reckoning up all the forces that operate upon us, and drawing from all we see and hear lessons concerning the providence of God: thus shall we be at church every day, and spend our lives at the altar, and shall be possessed of that understanding without which all other wealth is mockery. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: may we begin there, for no other beginning is possible, and growing up into all life, yea, into the very sky of the brightness of wisdom, may we be children of the light, known and read of all men as simple and true and honest. All these desires are the creation of God; they are strange to us, they are not born in us of the flesh; these are the miracles of thy grace: may it please thee to strengthen them all, encourage them and sustain them, and bring them to ample fruition. We bless thee for thy continued care. He that keepeth Israel doth not slumber, yea, his eyelids close not: behold, thou art the same to us by night as by day, and the darkness and the light are both alike unto God. Direct our steps in wisdom; suffer us not to follow the false light of our own fancy, or to seek to consummate the purposes of our perverted will: may we know no will but thine; then shall there be joy in the heart as those who keep wedding festival, and there shall be brightness before us as those who dwell on the mountain-tops, far above the cloud and fog of the earth. We beseech thee to give us a clearer apprehension of Jesus Christ as the incarnate God,—God in flesh, God in vision, God near enough to be seen, and touched, and heard with the open ear,—and through him may we become sons of God; may he lift up our whole being, and make us know the joy of the security of spiritual adoption: then shall all our prayer be “Father,” and if beyond that we have no utterance, it is enough; it means all thy love and all our need. Be more than loving to those who need thee most—to the sick, whose days are grief and whose nights are pain; to those who watch the dying and who thus die many deaths. Be with those who are mourning great losses, who have dug deep graves and cannot fill them up. Be with all who would be in the sanctuary if they could, but are kept away from it by illness. Be

with all travellers on land and on sea, and comfort them, and give them security and favour in the sight of the people; bring them back again in health and joy. Be with all who are in perplexity, not knowing what to do, whose life is a series of failing experiments, who try and fail, who travel up the hill and fall backward at eventide, so that the journey remains unaccomplished; the Lord give them steadiness of mind, or surely they will faint away and die in bewilderment. Give the children thy blessing; take them up in thine arms and bless them; then when thou dost set them down again they will be ready for all the duty of time. Have mercy upon us wherein we have sinned; when we say we are miserable sinners we know the depth of the meaning of the words: the Lord send to us messages from the Cross, and wherein we cry from our hearts, and are contrite in our spirits, really and truly sorry for the wreck we have wrought, do thou lift us up again into the sunlight of forgiveness, and give us the liberty of pardon. Be with us for the few nights and days we have yet to work off on the wheel of time: they fly away, and they are not; they are gone, and we cannot count them. May we, through the blood of the everlasting Covenant and the eternal energy of the Spirit, be better to-day than we were yesterday. Amen.

Chapter xvii. 14; xviii. 4, 5.

GOD IN OPPOSITION.

READING some portions of Isaiah is like passing through a succession of thunderstorms on a dark night: no sooner is one over than another begins: the darkness is cut to pieces by lightning, and the most solid things are rent and torn by the very demon of anger: nations are split like soft wood; empires are shattered like the toys of a child; as for kings, they melt like bubbles on a stream; thrones are no more accounted of than the stubble which is cut up by the plough. It is grand reading—for those who are not involved in the tragedy. Those who look from the shore upon some mighty ship, billow-struck, grappling with the very ogre of ruin, may describe the scene in poetic terms; but the men on board are white with agony or dumb with despair. So it is with this succession of thunderbursts and lightning flashes and destructive strokes. The contempt which the prophet expresses for empires, nations, kings, crowns, armies, and things grand and overwhelming could not have been his own. It is at once too sublime and too subtle to be mere poetry. We know human contempt and its measure, all its bitterness and all its little scope. There is an inspired contempt—a scorn which burns like the fire of God. Men know when they

are the subjects of inspired contempt. It is easy to distinguish between a sneer and a divine scorning, a prejudice and an eternal judgment. Who cares for a human sneer? It may be changed into a smile to-morrow, and both sneer and smile are of precisely the same value; but a man knows when he is righteously overborne, when he is hunted to death by God. There is a prejudice that comes and goes, and mere action of opinion; and there is a scorning which fills the sky, so terrible that a man may not look up, or he will be cursed by the just contempt. Isaiah never made this scorn; no poet ever made it. "The glory of Moab shall be contemned, with all that great multitude; and the remnant shall be very small and feeble"; "In that day shall Damascus be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, and there shall be desolation"; "The harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow"; "God shall rebuke the nations, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind." This is no mere poetry; it would not be poetry, it would be cruelty, if there be not under it all an explanatory righteousness. The moral element saves it from being a mere play of fancy, an intellectual aurora borealis. This is the very judgment of God. And we know it all. We are well aware when we are rightly judged. When others are applauding us and we are condemning ourselves, the discrepancy is an awful irony in the soul; the applause goes for nothing, it is empty wind, it is a passing noise; but this interior judgment, this self-condemnation, kills every comforter who comes unconsciously to mock us with his solace.

"And behold at eveningtide trouble; and before the morning he is not" (xvii. 14). God fights some battles between evening and morning. The black night is the field of war. It is all over by the dawn. Not a voice can be heard; nothing can be seen but desolation: how it was done no man can tell. The darkness fights for God; it is not only a soldier of his, but a great army, immeasurable, invincible. Some processes are hidden. The night is needed for more than rest. God could make us sleep in the daytime, and have us watched in our slumber, as it were, by the sun. But the night is wholly given over to sleep. How

busy the angels are on the fields of darkness ! How they dart through it like flashes of light ! How they come in dream and vision ! Who can tell all this nocturnal ministry, in its beginning, its action, its purpose, its end ? "Thou fool ! this night shall thy soul be required of thee." Men are fetched at night by the invisible constable : they are looked for in the morning, and there is nothing but the mould they left on the bed in which they intended to sleep. Who reckons the night when he adds up his time ? It may go for nothing to us because of our unconsciousness, but God sleeps not, nor do his judgments tarry for the light. Or we may reverse the scene, and make even this picture rich with beauty ; it may be loaded with messages of comfort. Is it the enemy who comes up at eventide ? Is it Sennacherib that plants his army at sundown, and says he will work ruin upon the fortresses of Jerusalem ? Behold in the morning he is not ! The angel of death swept down with a blast, and a great wind carried away the boastful foe. Thus, still God works in the night time. The ministry of the night is not interfered with by change of figure or by change of its application. Hear this singing word, and say how well it fits the scene : "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." Speaking of the wicked we may apply the figure of night so as to find in it terror and fear, sorrow, and judgment, and death ; speaking of the good man, we may say, Dry thy tears, thou foolish unbelieving weeper, or shed them gratefully to get rid of a needless burden ; for sorrow endureth but for a night, joy cometh in the morning : take in the black guest, do what thou canst for him, he is sent of God for holy purposes ; he can live but for a night, thou mightest afford to be kind to him ; it were but one night in a long life.

This rule may be applied to more places than one in the prophecies of Isaiah. We are not always reading of judgment, even when apparently there is a tone of threatening in the words, for the threatening may be directed against the enemy, and a rich promise may be hidden in its very heart, to be handled and lived upon by the honest soul. "This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us." So it would appear that the figure is one intended for the comfort of the people of God. We may fall asleep indeed, and in the morning

inquire, How goes the war? and, behold, the warriors are dead and gone. "With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." Robbery is a compound act. A man who steals a loaf of bread when he is hungry, and does it openly, and does it as a last resource, is no robber. He has the right of humanity to the loaf that is in the cupboard of society. The man who steals under sudden temptation, who confesses, repents, and restores, must be forgiven, and must be numbered amongst honest men. Sydney Smith was a magistrate, but the poor people said he pleaded like a parson with the magistrates when they wished to condemn a poor man who, being half-starved, shot game or snared it for the relief of himself and his family. He was a prophet of the Lord when he so pleaded. The witty canon had understanding of human nature and of divine purposes, and he was a just judge when he said, Forgive the hard-pressed man, for thus only could he keep together body and soul. But this is not the robbery spoken of in the text, nor is it the kind of robbery that society must set itself against with a thousand unsparing penalties. The difficulty is this, that the great robber is a hero, and the little robber is a felon. It is the same with war. A man who overthrows a nation is memorialised on brass and marble; a man who kills a solitary fellow-creature is handed over to the public hangman: the one is a hero, feted by kings and princes, and the other is a murderer, locked up in an iron cage, and kept to be hanged. It is the same way with robbery. A man robs other nations, and we call him great. The little robber is a coward; he waits until the light is put out, until the streets are silent; he can hear his own heart beat, then he puts forth the thievish hand. The robber is a liar. He has to live a lie, though perhaps he may never openly tell one. He is himself a lie. The robber is a false accuser: he has to blame other people, or to blame circumstances, or to blame in some way the subtle influences which have been brought to bear upon him. The robber is an enemy of society; he brings other persons under suspicion. But there is a kind of robbery of which even honest men may be guilty. Let us be careful how we condemn a man who breaks any one of the ten commandments; he may only have broken one, and his critics may have broken the whole ten.

"Thou shalt not steal" is not applied to the purse, which has been poetically denominated "trash"; we may steal good names, fair reputations, just rewards; we may endeavour to trouble a man who is being honestly applauded by those to whom he has done good by suggesting doubts and fears concerning him. He is but a little thief who takes money; he is a great robber who takes away peace of mind, trust in character, and who blocks up the way of a man in the world. In all such matters let us be just and complete in our view.

Now we come to a verse which is as divisible into two interpretations as the one we have just studied:—

"For so the Lord said unto me, I will take my rest, and I will consider in my dwelling-place like a clear heat upon herbs, and like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest. For afore the harvest, when the bud is perfect, and the sour grape is ripening in the flower, he shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away and cut down the branches" (xviii. 4, 5).

How full of suggestion is this as to the method of the divine administration! "I will take my rest." God is supposed to utter these words. And they would seem to encourage those who have hidden themselves in false security; they say, The sky is clearer, the wind has gone down, all danger is past, now we may venture forth; not knowing that God is, humanly speaking, taking his rest. Having laid down the weapons of judgment he is considering in his heaven what shall be done next. The wrong-doer thinks that all is past and gone, dead and forgotten, and that he is now at liberty to go forth as a man unrecognised, without the old felon's brand. Nothing of the kind. Whoever goes into punishment goes into everlasting punishment. Why this ado about everlasting torment and penalty? Every penalty is eternal, if it is just. A man may suffer penalty, and be the better for it, the nobler; he may even secure to himself a lasting place in the gratitude of society; we are not speaking of such penalty, but of punishment which is due, just, righteous altogether. Never can that brand be taken out of the flesh; the hideous root and seam will be observed there, though the flesh be healed to the eye. God may have but withdrawn. We are obliged to resort to figure and to illustration, for only so can we approach

the mysteries of the divine nature for the time to consider what judgment can be added, or what weapon can be next employed.

Then again the figure suggests that righteousness is assured. That is to say, it will be reasserted and will be vindicated, and at last righteousness will stand up in the light, whilst wickedness will be buried in the grave, marked only by contempt. The sword is only resting; it will be used again, and always used in the interests of righteousness. Thus we may turn this image, and find in it also, as in the former one, abounding comfort; for it may suggest assured helpfulness to the good. Is God apparently withdrawn from us? He will come again. Is the Christian work being overborne? It is, but for a small moment: God is only resting, considering; and when men are putting forth their hands to reach all the fulness of the harvest he will cut off branches and all the fields of wheat, and they shall thrust their hands into the darkness, and reap nothing but emptiness. This may be the real meaning of the passage, which may be then thus paraphrased: You think I have forsaken you, but you are mistaken; you suppose your cause is lost, but the cause of righteousness can never be lost: I am resting, considering, giving time an opportunity of exerting its influence; the whole thing is still within the hollow of my hand, and all things will be settled on a basis of infinite righteousness. Let us then be careful how we apply some of the sterner passages of Scripture, for we may occasionally, by the very stress of our fear, be misapplying them, and thus make God talk judgment to us when in reality he is pronouncing benedictions. The heart in all such cases is the best annotator and critic. Let a man feel that he deserves judgment, penalty, yea, hell itself, and he will find an abundance in the Scriptures which will confirm his own self-condemnation. Let him, contrariwise, be pure of soul, docile of spirit, anxious to know the divine will and do it all; then even in the lowering clouds he will hear a voice, in the darkening heavens he will see a star, in the thunder-peal he will hear a still small voice coming to his heart like the very music of heaven. The Bible is to us what we are to the Bible: to the froward God is froward, to the pure in soul he is a condescending Friend,—yea,

he will come into the man's heart and sup with him, and make his abode with him.

Here, then, opens the great field of application. Have we done wrong? We can never undo it. But we can repent. And this may, in effect, undo it for us. There is one thing we can never do—we can never forgive ourselves. Though our eyes were a fountain of tears, and our head were waters poured out in torrents, yet when all the floods are past there is the dark hideous fact, as palpable and ghastly as ever. Society may forgive us, God may forgive us, but unless we are lifted up in highest spiritual communion, touching even ecstasy and rapture itself, we dare not look back, or we should see the black spectre steadily keeping an accusing eye upon us. Blessed be God, self-forgiveness is impossible. Have we taken that which is not our own? Restore it; it is in vain to think that detection can be escaped; it can be escaped to-day and to-morrow, but the third day will be alive with a light of revelation and criticism, judgment and penalty. Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not go unpunished. What, then, is the right spiritual attitude in relation to all this line of reflection?—"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Let there be no boasting, no mockery, no ruthless taunting. "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." If I can boast of my honesty, I am not honest; if I make it ostentatious, I make it unreal; if I have done any good, the good is all done by the living God within me. This should be the spiritual temper and attitude of every man who desires to serve God. Does this, then, mean indifference to wrong-doing? On the contrary, it means the highest sensitiveness towards wrong-doing and all its participants. But it also means self-control, self-judgment; and every incident in life will be lost upon us if it does not leave behind this impression, that if we have been saved from being murderers, adulterers, robbers, evil men of any kind or degree, we have been so saved by the grace of God.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we are full of joy, because our work is to be tried by thyself, and not by another. Thou knowest all things; thou art merciful and just; thou dost try the reins of the children of men, but thou dost look upon them all with eyes of pity and of love. Thy judgment will stand when all other criticism fails and is forgotten. We would that we might, by thy grace, stand well with thee, that we might be accepted in the Beloved, that we might in all things be approved by thyself as men who are faithfully doing the work which thou hast put into their hands. The battle is not ours, but thine; the work is not man's, it is God's own work, and will be done in God's own time, yea, unto the putting on of the topstone amid gratulation and highest joy. Enable us to work during the few days that remain even to the strongest of us: behold, the time of the lengthening of the shadow hasteneth, and man goeth to his long home; may every one of us work with both hands diligently, always acknowledging the divine direction, always seeking heavenly inspiration; conceiving and inventing nothing of our own, but always with our face toward the rising sun and the opening heavens, that we may receive from on high our instruction and our charge and our inspiration. Bless those to whom thou hast appointed the discipline of suffering in great measure; say unto them that it all occurs for their purification, and release from evil bonds, and introduction into holy liberty. Dry the tears of unusual sorrow, the rivers of that great grief which can come but once in a lifetime and never reappear, compared with which all other distress is as a passing cloud. Nourish us, strengthen us, fill us with thy Spirit, redeem us every day with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, for being cleansed by that we shall be undefiled, and being released from sin by that energy we shall not be brought again into the captivity of evil. If the Lord will hear us, his hearing shall be unto us as a gracious answer. Amen.

Chapter xix.

DIVINE ACTION.

WE seem to have fallen upon commonplace times, unless indeed we have the prophetic instinct and imagination which can turn even apparent commonplaces into things really grand and spiritually significant. What great winds roar through these prophecies of Isaiah! what startling judgments fall upon the nations! what trumpetings and thunderings! what rendings

and revolutions! and yet we seem to be standing in quietness and peace, and nothing is occurring around us which does not lie easily within the limits of the coldest calculation. Perhaps, however, there would be more stirring of the divine energy if we had the hearing ear and the seeing eye: that energy may still be moving on, but we may have lost its music through our spiritual indifference. If the picture is in the eye of the beholder, if the music is in the ear of the listener, if eloquence is in the hearer as much as in the speaker, then may we not turn upon ourselves with pungent accent and say that it is because we have lost the faculty of observation, the eyes of insight, and the power of attention, that we allow providence now to move on without recognition and without praise? It is a common observation that to the humorist humorous things are constantly occurring—that he sees them where dull eyes would take no note of them. So, to the philosopher philosophy is always evolving itself, arresting his attention, fascinating him with new aspects, and delighting him with new possibilities. So it would be to the student of providence, or history, of God. If the right spirit were in us there would be no want of material. All winds are alike to the dead; the cemetery knows nothing of the thunderstorm or of the quiet beauty of the dawn. If we had more life, we should have more insight and more knowledge, and be quite sure that God still reigns and holds everything within the grasp of his almighty hand. Probably Isaiah had more life than we have; so he had more gift of prophecy. If we have resigned the prophet's mantle, and said we have fallen upon insignificant days, God may let us have our own way so far; he may allow us to feed upon the wind and to satisfy our hunger with the sand of the desert. If we do not see great things to-day, it is not because great things are not occurring, but because we have lost the faculty of sight and the genius of reverent attention. We may be gleaners in a great historic field. To that humble capacity we may at least betake ourselves. Those who were immediately interested in the occurrences related in such a chapter have passed on: now we may modestly find our way into the field which they once occupied, and by looking carefully around we may be able to see an ear or two of corn, which, rightly used, planted in the right soil, and

fostered by the right conditions, may even now bring forth thirty and sixty fold.

The prophet is great in this chapter ; indeed, Isaiah is always great. Yet how wonderful it is that his greatness subsides so as to allow the divine majesty even the advantage of a background. Isaiah's power of language never fails him,—his harp is never out of tune, his fingers never lose their cunning ; and he is as great in these minor burdens which he is now uttering as in the greater burdens we have already studied : yet he steps aside and allows the divine action to be seen in all its energy and mystery. Let us note a few points in that divine action. •

Here is one way in which the Lord comes—namely, “upon a swift cloud” (ver. 1). The intimation is one of mystery. No man can tell which way the Lord will come to-day. Let us keep our eyes upon every point of the horizon ; let us distribute the watchmen wisely, and assign to each his sphere of observation ; for by what door the Lord may enter the field of vision no one can tell,—by a political event, by some new movement in foreign policy, by the discovery of new riches in the earth, by great shocks which try men's strength, by grim sorrow, by cruel death, by judgments that have no name, by mercies tender as the tenderest love, by compassions all tears, by providences that are surprises of gladness : watch all these doors, for by any one of them the Lord may come into the nation, the family, the individual heart. This divine policy, if it may be so named, baffles the watchers who trust to their own sagacity. If men say they will circumvent God and know all the ways of his providence, behold God forsakes all ways that are familiar and that lie within the calculation of the human mind ; and he startles those who watch with light from unexpected quarters, with shakings and tremblings never before felt in the vibrations of history. “Clouds and darkness are round about him” : the cloud that appears to be nothing but vapour may enshrine the Deity ; the bush, yesterday so common that any bird might have alighted upon it, to-day burns with unseen, infinite energy. The Lord will come by what way he pleases,—now as if from the depths of the earth, and now as from the heights of heaven ;

blessed is that servant who is ready to receive him and to welcome him to the heart's hospitality of love.

Notice a method of administration which belongs to all the ages of Providence. It is recorded in the second verse :—

“ will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians : and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour ; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom.”

Civil war is the cruellest of all. When men are stretching forth the neck of their expectation that they may behold in the far distance an approaching enemy, God troubles them with home difficulties, and they who were going forth to win new laurels on distant fields have to turn round and slay one another, sons of the same parents, inheritors of the same soil ! This is distinctly ascribed to the divine energy and will : “ I will set ” : I will create the war, I will make it of the kind known as internecine ; men who have known one another a lifetime I will make enemies ; and this shall all be done that good may be wrought out, which under any other circumstances would be impossible. This method of administration, we say, obtains and prevails in all ages. This is the meaning of many a controversy, of many a quarrel, of many a dissension, in cabinets, in families, in nations. Men are surprised that they should turn upon their brothers with disdain, and even with cruel hatred. It is indeed matter of surprise and great sorrow, and if looked at within narrow limits it would seem to be a reflection upon Providence ; but when does God ask to be judged within the four corners of human imagination or criticism ? He not only does the deed, he does it within a field which he himself has measured, and within the range of declarations which have about them all the mystery and graciousness of evangelical prophecies. We must, therefore, look not only at the incident, but at all its surroundings and to all its issues. When we are puzzled by household difficulties, by commercial perplexities, by unions that only exist for a moment and then dissolve or are turned into sourness and alienation, we must never forget that there is One who rules over all, and who may be the Author of this fratricidal war. The mystery of Providence is infinite, Lord, increase our faith !

Observe, further, the religion of bewilderment. It is graphically set forth in the third verse :—

“And the spirit of Egypt shall fail in the midst thereof; and I will destroy the counsel thereof: and they shall seek to the idols, and to the charmers, and to them that have familiar spirits, and to the wizards.”

How often have we seen men seek out their deities in the time of trouble! To know what a man's religion really is we must wait until all heaven is dark with thunderclouds, and until what he believed to be the solid earth feels under his feet like a quaking bog; then we shall know whether he has been playing the little philosopher, adventuring his little intellectual all with the small empiric, or whether there is in him the real seed of God, the true life divine. Imagine the picture: all Egypt is bewildered and dismayed, not knowing which is east, which is west, which is the upper place, which is the underground; all distinctions, boundaries, limits, are blurred and obliterated; and hear the howling and the crying for the deities to whose care the heart and all its issues have been entrusted! What a call for charmers, and for familiar spirits, and for wizards, and for anything that can mutter and offer some religious hope to the shattered fancy of man! Thus God educates the world. There come times in human history when a man revises all his ideas, conceptions, theories, hypotheses, and professions: what a casting out of the ship there is of all these things in the great storm-hour! The ship is heavy laden and the sea is heavy upon her planks, and all hope of being saved is taken away—then out go all the false theories, and prejudices, and philosophies, and mutterings, and impieties, and hypocrisies, if haply even yet the poor ship may be saved. It is well that such times should occur; they are cleansing times, dismantling and disburdening times; and, rightly used, we come out of them with simpler prayers, larger faith, tenderer love. Lord, show us the meaning of all thy shakings of the earth, and all the evermore truly governed but seemingly ungoverned perplexities of the human mind.

Then there is a wonderful action of Providence in the matter of natural blessings :—

“The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and every thing sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more.

The fishers also shall mourn, and all they that cast angle into the brooks shall lament, and they that spread nets upon the waters shall languish. Moreover they that work in fine flax, and they that weave networks, shall be confounded. And they shall be broken in the purposes thereof, all that make sluices and ponds for fish" (vers. 7-10).

The natural food of Egypt shall be taken away. What does the country produce? God will one day lay his hand upon it all, and taking it from us will leave nothing but emptiness, that we may learn in hunger the prayer we could not have learned in fulness. God will empty the Nile—God will lay his hand upon the busy mill in the manufacturing districts and order it to be quiet; God will intercept the incoming of the hemp, the flax, the cotton—whatever the product may be—so that it shall be lost on the way, and the men who were expecting its arrival shall be confounded with disappointments. All these things are God's. And all these prophecies show on what a deep rock-basis lies the great word of Christ, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you," for the Lord is God of the rivers and the fords and the seas, and the vineyards and the wheatfields and the olive-yards, and God will rain into the wilderness feathered fowl from heaven if such should be his determination and purpose. He is Lord of all. The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof. Our daily bread is given to us from heaven: blessed are they who recognise the gift, and who eat the bread as sacramental flesh, having in it meanings of life and immortality, not obvious to the merely carnal eye. Let us ask questions about our poverty and about our unprosperous harvests, our withering fields, our rivers choked with dead fish, our sluices and networks that we cannot move or set in successful action. Let the question be religious. No question is worth asking that does not bore its way into the heart of things. Whilst others may be asking flippant questions about the decay of industry, the depression of trade, the clouding of commercial prospects, let those who believe in an over-ruling Providence renounce all trivial inquiries, and begin to ask their questions within the shadow of the altar. It may be that we have sinned, and that God's only way of touching our conscience is through the impoverishment of the body. No man may dogmatise on these things; but holy, noble, large, reverent questions may be asked surely, when the earth trembles and becomes uncertain in her very revolutions.

Then there is an action of the divine energy upon the mind as shown in ver. 14:—

“The Lord hath mingled a perverse spirit in the midst thereof : and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit.”

What is this action ? It may be indicated by a familiar word which does not occur in the text. When we read of a “perverse spirit” we may substitute for that expression *dizziness*. God turns a man dizzy, so that he is drunk, but not with wine. How many powers has the Almighty ! We have seen by how many doors he may come in. How many are the actions of God in human history ! He makes Egypt dizzy ; he does not strike Egypt with a rod of iron, or confound her by some great phenomena that burn all over the face of heaven to affright her,—he simply sends dizziness into the nation, so that the king feels all things going round, and the mean man is sure that he has lost his wit and sense and shrewdness ; he fixes his eye upon stable pillars, and, behold, they move, they circulate, and he says, Is it I or is it the pillar moving ? so that he cannot reason, he cannot put things together ; when he begins to count he forgets his reckoning, when he commences a story he cuts it off at an inferior point, and cannot conduct it to a period ; yet he says he is well, he is without a pain, he cannot account for this whirl, this movement, it is taking him on and on, and away and away ; he says, What is it ? How God can humble men ! The strong man shall need a little child to lead him, and the sagacious man may require a child to help his memory, for his recollection is quite withered ; and they who once were proud ask to be allowed to take the meanest position ; and men whose judgment was once waited for because of its completeness and solidity are now not reckoned with the counsellors of the land. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Now the Lord himself will prophesy. The Lord in going away from a people sometimes suddenly turns round and looks at them, and behold there is a smile where once there was a frown :—

“In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord. And it shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt : for they

shall cry unto the Lord because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a saviour, and a great one, and he shall deliver them. And the Lord shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation; yea, they shall vow a vow unto the Lord, and perform it. And the Lord shall smite Egypt: he shall smite and heal it: and they shall return even to the Lord, and he shall be intreated of them, and shall heal them" (vers. 19-22).

Here the Lord says that Egypt is given over to himself in holy obedience and love and homage. The Lord shall be the God of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God; lands that have been filled with idols shall be cleansed of all their folly and wickedness, and in the midst of them shall stand the pillar of God, emblem of righteousness and purity, and the border thereof shall be as a border of gold, set with precious stones. There is always a line of hope even in connection with the darkest judgment. The Lord never gives up the issue of things to the devil. He recognises the devil's existence, and allows him to operate within certain lines upon the life of nations and the life of individuals, but always he sees the latter end, and says, The evening shall be brighter than the morning; when all this tragedy is completed Jesus shall have the heathen for his inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for a possession. We see but a little, we know next to nothing; but God who is enthroned in eternity tells us that there shall yet arise upon the earth a morning without a cloud, there shall shine over the whole land a day in which there is no frown of judgment. In these vaticinations the soul lives; and because they are written in the Book of God, souls that otherwise would be cast into dejection toil with hopefulness because their assurance is in God.

From studies of this kind we learn that the scheme of Providence is one. Details vary, but the divine movement never changes as to its moral characteristics and its beneficent purpose. We have seen how prophets and poets are at liberty to decorate great judgment-utterances with all manner of illustration and imagery, trope and metaphor, according to the fertility of the individual genius; but the innermost thing is always the same, namely, Say ye unto the righteous, It shall be well with him; say ye unto the wicked, he is on the way to ruin. We learn that escape from judgment is impossible. God handles all the nations one

after another—Moab, and Damascus, and Egypt, and the desert sea, and the Valley of Vision, and the land of Tyre,—all are under his notice, and if any one of them seems to be missed it is only for a moment; the time comes when the smallest of the peoples as well as the greatest shall be judged by the living God. The eternal lesson is that the only security is in being right. Righteousness fears no judgment. “The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.” The good man cares not who comes up the path, he can bring no danger to him. The honest soul is not frightened by the rustling of a leaf, no footfall shakes down the cowardice of his frail security; he says, I live in God, I am the servant of the living God, I know no will but God’s; come, go, who will, who may, my foundation standeth sure, and is inscribed in letters of gold with this legend, “The Lord knoweth them that are his.” “Righteousness exalteth a nation.” Righteousness is the glory of any man. How calm is the righteous man! Others are hearing noises which affright them; they are sure the hour of crisis has come; an unfamiliar voice means the upsetting of judgment which is already shaken, but the righteous man is calm in the darkness and in the light, he has an abundance of peace in the storm, his vintage is empurpled with richest grapes even in the winter time, and all his mountains are covered with cattle even when other lands are depopulated and ruined; if he have nothing, he yet has all things; if his hands are empty, his heart is overflowing; he says, “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” To be at peace with God is to control all things; for it is to be one with God. The immediate burden is passed, the historical reference is fulfilled, but the eternal thing that looks upon us all is this, that God is on the throne, and that he will judge morally. To whom much has been given from him shall much be expected. He that knew his Lord’s will and did it not shall be beaten with many stripes; he who did his best, though that best was but little, shall be recognised and honoured. The way of the Lord is equal. Blessed are they who, through the Son of God, Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world, are at peace with God through the Atonement which was wrought out in Gethsemane and on Calvary. For that blessedness let all men seek!

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we know thee through thy Son, Jesus Christ. Did he not say unto us, He that hath seen me hath seen the Father? and is he not known unto us as Immanuel, and as God manifest in the flesh? We read his life, therefore, that we may read thy life, thou Infinite One. Into this condescension hast thou come, that we may peruse thy ways and understand somewhat of thy purpose, and follow thee in all the great mystery of thy providence. We watch the Son of man, not that we may see him alone, but that we may see the Father also, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders. Beyond the man we see thyself, Father of us all. Help us thus to read the life of thy Son; then shall it be a new life to us, a new mystery will show itself in it day by day. The Lord grant unto us a wise and understanding heart, that we may read all nature aright, and all providence; that we may put the pieces and sections of history together with a skilful hand, and thus discover that in so doing we are wise master-builders, erecting a temple, building a sanctuary, yea, rearing an altar; and we shall see that every place is holy ground and every spot of earth is the gate of heaven. May we read ourselves aright,—these wondrous mysteries that are within us, these incalculable palpitations, throbings, pulsings, urgings of a strange force: may we know that what is within us is of the nature of divinity; may we understand that God breathed into the nostrils of man the breath of life, and that he became, by what processes we know not, a living soul. Help us to rear the soul into all strength and healthfulness and nobleness; may we bestow more culture upon the soul than upon the body. We know that in our body is written the condemnation of death, but on our soul is written the signature of God. May we be wise men herein, caring for the greater more than for the less, showing intenser concern about the infinite future than about the decayed past and the transient present. The years are flying away; more have gone in many instances than can be yet to come upon the earth; the tale is more than half told, yea, it has now come down to its last paragraphs and trembling sentences, so that the earth recedes, and time rolls back, and nothing is so near as heaven's brightness as the judgment of eternity. We would be solemn in this view, composed in mind, sober in understanding, putting away from us all levity, frivolity, folly, and looking calmly upon the certainties of things, knowing that now as ever there is but a step between us and death. Yet we would be joyful; thou hast not brought us into thy Church to make us sad: whosoever has been crucified with Christ shall be raised with him, and in the anticipated glory of resurrection thy people may despise the shame of the Cross and triumph over all its abasement. Enable us to look at the future from the Cross of

Christ. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: all kings shall bow down before him, and bring gold and incense in worship; all nations shall call the Redeemer blessed. These words were spoken in the night time of history, yea, when the darkness was sevenfold; and we have lived to see the dawning of the brighter day, the beginning of the infinite splendour. Enable us to believe that the zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish every prophecy. Save us from self-trust, from intellectual vanity, from supposing that ought depends upon us but humble toil: may we know that the decree is written in eternity, and that the covenant dates from unbeginning time. Thus may we be lifted up in the whole Christian thought, raised to a vital atmosphere, inspired by the Holy Ghost to read, and think, and understand. Thou lookest upon the whole earth, in the midst of summer, and in the depth of winter; thou knowest its poor little tragic history, full of sin and self-sufficiency, and bitterness and all evil—a very hell in space. Yet thou dost love the earth as if it were an only star, as if thine own peace and blessedness depended upon its purity and tranquillity. Thou didst send thy Son to be born upon it, to live upon it, to teach it, to redeem it; yea, he has made it twice sacred by his birth and by his resurrection. He was twice born here; we will call it Christ's natal place; we will think of the cradle, and of the grave that was vanquished, and bless the Lord that Christ has touched our history and made it noble. Lord, many whom thou lovest are sick, and the Sabbath bells cannot raise them even into momentary gladness: life is ebbing away; all the little joys of time have departed one by one from their dim eyes, and young children who seem born only to laugh are filled with crying and tears. Thou dost permit the earth to open and swallow up the loved remains of our dead. Thou knowest best; the whole nation is within thy rule, and thou wilt not withhold thy blessing where the stroke is severest. O Physician of men, Healer of broken hearts, Emancipator of slaves, look upon us, come near us, touch us every one, and give us to feel that the earth sin-laden is yet not God-forsaken. Amen.

Chapter xxii.

THE VALLEY OF VISION.

JERUSALEM was the valley of vision. Jerusalem was called a valley in this instance in relation to the great hills by which the Holy City was surrounded—"As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people." The mountain-tops are higher than the pinnacles of the minster or the abbey, the temple or the cathedral. We always build under God. Some wondrous change has taken place here. Jerusalem is inquired about as an invalid would be asked after—"What aileth thee now?" What is this trouble? Thy name really is associated with joy: "Thou art full of stirs, a tumultuous

city, a joyous city"; a thousand angels sing in the darkest night in thy sky, and thou art full of gladness: what trouble is this that makes thy heart sore, that infuses a new tone into thy voice? This is not customary, what is the meaning of it? In the valley of vision are found men who are gifted with eyesight. A very perilous gift! In a modified sense, blessed are they who see nothing: in the larger sense, requiring ample time for its exposition and vindication, blessed are they who see the whole horizon; they often see dimly, that is to say, the figures upon the horizon may be mistaken for clouds, little as the hand of man, but they gladden the prophet's heart, the prophet sees the farther meanings, the larger blessings, the days that are coming—morning light, crowned with glory, and never descending into nocturnal shades. We need men of that piercing vision to help us, for sometimes the days are laden with darkness; now and again it is irony to speak of day, for the whole sky seems to be clothed with frowns; it is at such times that men of vision are right heartily welcome. They see in the darkness; because of the inspiration of God, the darkness and the light are both alike unto them. These men we call prophets, who are not to be interpreted by deaf, dumb, and blind men, but only by those who have kindred faculty, though in very limited degree. To what changes, then, are men and hearts, and cities and lands, exposed! "What aileth thee?" Our joy may be turned into sorrow; the root out of which came bud and blossom and fruit, beautiful to the eyes and to be desired to make one wise, may grow nothing but poison. We hold nothing certainly, with an assurance that cannot be broken, with guarantees that cannot be violated. When we grip any prize with our poor five fingers, the fingers themselves may fail to hold the blessing, and that which we thought secure may vanish in a moment. Make the best of the present time; realise what is written as soon as you can, turn it into positive, absolute property, into soul, into manhood, that cannot be taken away from you but by your own consent.

Yet what taunting there is in all this apparent condolence! "Thy slain men are not slain with the sword, nor dead in battle." How graciously cruel we can sometimes be! How we can taunt

and mock men even with messages of condolence and sympathy and yearning solicitude. What is the meaning of this reproach? The meaning is that the men were cowards, that they were all wounded in the back and not in the breast; they had turned away from the enemy, and had been struck down from behind. Or it may mean that the men had killed themselves; luxury had overpowered them; yielding to the weaknesses of the flesh had ended in their destruction. We glory in our heroes, we are ashamed of our cowards. A reckoning is made of men's actions, and in the long-run men have the right epitaph assigned to them in the graveyard of the ages. The question for us to propose to ourselves is, What shall be our record when we are dead? Shall men say of us, They died bravely, they died hard, they struck back again with heroic force, and now that they are dead even those who opposed them will place a wreath upon the cold heart? Or shall it be said of us, They will never be missed for their valour, their sympathy, their generosity, their goodness; they have left no empty place in any human heart? It is for us to say what our record in these regards shall be. Blessed be God, it lies within the power of every one of us to make somebody weep—really cry manly noble tears, because our face is seen no more. You can do that in the family, in the business circle, in the church; you do not want the world for a stage, you want but your common daily sphere in which to live a life of beauty, and create a memory of beneficence.

Then see how nature itself may be degraded by the spirit of war:—

“And it shall come to pass, that thy choicest valleys shall be full of chariots, and the horsemen shall set themselves in array at the gate’ (ver. 7).

The valley was never made for war; the choice valley was made for garden-land and wheat-fields and vineyards, not for the pomp and circumstance of war, for the carnage of military cruelty. Thus nature is degraded, dishonoured, discrowned. Gibeon, and Rephaim, and Hinnom, and Jehoshaphat—meant to grow wine and oil and bread for the inhabitants of the city—are turned into a great slaughter-house. Sin degrades everything, blights all the flowers, hushes all the music, turns back all

the light; it hates the morning, because the morning reveals, detects, and makes stand out in ghastly clearness things that long to hide themselves in some merciful cloud. So it is with the degradation of our faculties. Think of Imagination—that wing of the soul, that power by which we create new heavens and a new earth—being degraded, so as to have to take into account numbers of men opposed to men, questions of bloodshed, questions of storming and overwhelming cities innocent and useful upon the earth; think of imagination being employed in discovering new methods of villainy! To such base uses may we come, that the poet's faculty may become a thief's investment! He will consider in the night-time what he may do to-morrow. What is he doing?—harnessing a very steed of heaven to a chariot that can roll only in a downward direction, and terminate its rolling only in hell. What art thou doing, O bad man?—perverting the finest faculties, filling the choicest valleys with proofs of evil, hurrying down thy whole nature to the base service of the devil. We should be careful of such prostitution: it leaves us weaker, poorer, meaner men; our faculties were meant to grow in an upward direction, to be plentiful in outshoots, in great branches each of which is equal to a tree itself, bearing an abundant harvest of fruit so that hunger may be satisfied, and creating great amplitude of shade under which the weary may lie down and rest. Sometimes it excites solicitude that men should have to consider any little questions at all—that they should be troubled with bread-getting, money-making, world-caressing,—they who ought always to be far away out, meeting God half-way, and holding high speech in tabernacles not made with hands. But it has pleased God so to constitute us that we must deal with little questions sometimes. Blessed be God, we need never deal with mean, unworthy, wicked questions; all these we can take up and throw into the fire, and though our questions be limited by our necessities they need not be debased by our passions and evil desires.

Now we come upon a line which we thought was to be found only in the New Testament; we come upon the sensualist's creed, and are surprised to find it an old one:—

“Let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we shall die” (ver. 13).

See the venerableness of evil! It is next in age to goodness.

Did the day go round before the black thing was born, a foil to white innocence and snowy purity? What is this origin of evil? did good necessitate it? did day mean night? was the night nothing till the day discovered it, and gave it figure and position and name? Who can answer all these questions? Truly none can reply to them with adequacy of explanation. Yet there stands the black disastrous fact, that we have the creed of the sensualist, we have the prison of the felon, we have all the little mean statements created by the unhallowed genius of the flesh. Even to-day men say to us, "Take short views of life." Within their meaning we accept the exhortation, because we know the men to be wise of heart, and that their anxiety is to save us from anxiety that is needless. But there is another sense in which the advice "Take short views of life" is wrong. The short view cannot be the right view. Periods are created by enlargement of themselves. Time is not an hour long, or of a day's brief span; yesterday is part of to-day; to-morrow will come with its explanation of the passing cloud; the days are run really into one continuity, charged with the same thought of divine love and purpose, and we are wicked when we break up time into days merely for the purpose of limiting our opportunities and shortening or lightening our responsibilities.

He lives wisely who lives in eternity: our citizenship is in heaven. The gait of the Christian as he moves should indicate that he is not simply walking for exercise, but travelling towards a city whose builder is God; he has hardly time to take off his sandals or to set down his staff; he says, "I can tarry but a night." Whither art thou bound, then? For the infinite, the eternal, the invisible; give me bread and water for the moment,—I hasten to the feast of God. Let us say that there is more or less of ideality in this: what would life be without its ideal views, its prophetic outlook, its genius of grasping the future? "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we shall die," is a fool's creed, even if it were true as to time. Say we die to-morrow, to eat and drink to-day is a beast's recreation. Say there is no third day, that life is made up of to-day and to-morrow, even then the right way is to abstain from eating and drinking, so far as they are exercises merely ministrant to the flesh,—even then it were best

to do good, to suffer for others, to dry the tear of sorrow, to help the lame, and lead the blind, and sing to those who are ill at ease. So that any way, even if there be no third day, it is better to live the upper life; and if there be a third day, and if that third day be a gate swinging back upon eternal duration, then blessed are they, and they only, whose lives are hidden with Christ in God.

Now comes another tone of mockery. The whole chapter is a wonderful succession of prophetic, expository, and rhetorical variety. The Lord mocks the insecure defences of men:—

“Go, get thee unto this treasurer, even unto Shebna, which is over the house” (ver. 15).

The word “treasurer” may mean companion, it may mean chamberlain, it may mean a man who is in charge of the king’s house, one who is in high office, who can do what he will under the king: go to him and taunt him, “What hast thou here? and whom hast thou here, that thou hast hewed thee out a sepulchre here, as he that heweth him out a sepulchre on high, and that graveth an habitation for himself in a rock?” (ver. 16.) What does it all amount to? The rock is God’s. Nature will one day say, Let me go back to my Creator; oh, thief, do not steal one pebble of all the earth; oh, wicked man, burden me not with thy carcase—I will not carry thee, thou foul thing! God will empty the sepulchres of the rocks; he will throw the wicked away. “Behold, the Lord will carry thee away with a mighty captivity, and will surely cover thee. He will surely violently turn and toss thee like a ball into a large country” (vers. 17, 18). The image is that of throwing a ball upon a level and smooth surface, so that it rolls to an infinite length; without attrition or hindrance of an appreciable kind, away rolls the smooth ball over the smooth surface, far beyond the measurement of men. Let us take heed to this. We can build nothing that God cannot unroof. God may begin, and does begin, at either of two points in his work of debilitation. Say he will come down upon the wicked man and work out his judgment; he will take part of the roof away, and a roof is no stronger than its weakest point—even a roof yields to that general law—and through that unroofed space the storm will pour down in pitiless fury. But God has another way of working out his judicial purpose, a way very secret, and

wholly beyond the control of men ; in that way he touches the foundation line, takes off the cornerstone, and the whole fabric is shaken down, and none can hinder the fall. The entire volume of human history is full of illustration of this. None can tell in what way God will come ; the great and blessed and all-saving truth is that he is coming, does come, must come, and none can hinder, and that his coming means judgment to the wicked and recognition to the good.

Now the Lord will come, and in tender mercy will edify, reconstruct, speak a word of hope to the heart of men :—

“And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah ” (ver. 20).

Who was he ? Nobody can tell. Where else is he referred to in Holy¹ Writ ? Probably nowhere. Was he, then, a man without renown ? That depends upon what you mean by renown, for he is indicated in the text by terms which imply infinite fame. Say “Eliakim,” and nobody knows him ; say “My servant Eliakim,” and obscurity rises up into eminence unrivalled, and never to be surpassed. Renown, then, may be nominal, or it may be moral. Nominal renown is a thing that comes and goes, a coloured cloud, a bubble on the river, a noise in the air, nothing that is substantial, nothing that is beneficent in itself ; but moral renown, the renown of goodness, the fame of character, the reputation associated with deeds of sacrifice or valour—that is a renown which lives in heaven. My soul, strive for it ! see that no man take thy crown. Yet God glorifies obscurity ; he brings forward unknown men to do great public work. Who can tell how God is training men in secret now ? Young men, take heart ; men working in obscure places, do not be discouraged : God keeps a perfect register of all his servants, and he knows well all their capacities and functions, and at the right time he will say, Come, stand up ; O thou least among the children of men, go to the front, and I will crown thee with strength—“I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand : and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah ” (ver. 21). Mark the royal “I.” There is no hint of consultation ; there is no suggestion of having received

a vote unanimous or divided, from some sustaining, watchful, or critical party; this *I* rolls on like a cataract; it is the voice of infinite sovereignty.

"And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (ver. 22).

Still the same tone. The Lord reigneth! Never let us try to settle how it is that one man is here and another man is there, and bring our petty judgment to bear upon the allotment; rather say, All these things are in God's hand; he setteth up, he putteth down, he calls the obscure to renown, and he puts back the foremost man into the cloud, so that he cannot be seen again. Lord, work as thou wilt, only give thy servants the believing heart, that they may know that thou doest all things well.

"And I will fasten him as a nail in a sure place" (ver. 23).

The image is that of a strong nail being driven into a beam, and on that nail, as on a peg, shall be hung all the issues of the family—"the offspring and the issue, all vessels of small quantity, from the vessels of cups, even to all the vessels of flagons." How one man becomes the head of the family, the strength of the nation, the leader of the people, the dependence of empires! Were that man to be taken out of his place, it would seem as though the whole nation would perish by his removal; were that character to fail, it would seem as if the whole Church would go mourning the rest of her days, sighing, sobbing, because the son of the morning had lost his centre and plunged into infinite night. That is what God does in society: he makes some men as nails and pegs, on which are hung great responsibilities; he makes some men as pillars on whom he rests all that is uppermost in the temple of his providence; he makes some men leaders, shepherds going in advance, that they may lead God's nations and flocks and households to his appointed place: let us recognise their character and their standing, and though we may not emulate their power, we can give them the joy of knowing that we never forget them in our tenderest prayers.

Is Eliakim safe evermore? No. There is a word of warning.

Elevation is only held on good character. Even God who drove in the nail can take it out again :—

“In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall the nail that is fastened in the sure place be removed, and be cut down, and fall ; and the burden that was upon it shall be cut off : for the Lord hath spoken it ” (ver. 25).

No nail once driven in can do without God, saying, I am driven in now, so I care not what may happen. The highest lives in obedience ; the strongest man becomes weaker than the weakest when he ceases to pray. Genius cannot keep a man in a high moral elevation. His genius will soon be discovered to be but cleverness, not the blooming out of a life that is hidden in the very mystery of God. Leader of the people, even thou mayest be dispossessed of thy leadership. Great statesmen are in the hands of God. Journalists, thinkers, the advance-guard of every name, all these hold their position on their good conduct. Let them be good and faithful servants ; let there be no selfishness in their ambition, no vain conceit because of the influence with which God hath clothed them ; even the nail that is fastened in the sure place may be removed, the very beam in which it finds a place may be cut in two and burned in unquenchable fire. So, then, we are nothing but in God ; we have no standing but in the Lord. Let us realise this, and pay attention to conduct. But we cannot pay attention to conduct unless we pay attention to spirit. Conduct is nothing in itself : it is everything only in so far as it expresses an inward, pure, gracious, holy temper.

Thus through all history we find the moral element, the eternal nerve by which God sustains and executes his purpose, without which history would become a chapter of accidents and society would revert to chaos. All figures, metaphors, and symbols may be changed or adapted according to the genius of the prophet who speaks ; but the great central quantity of truth no man may touch, diminish, or trifle with. In all history we come upon a day of judgment. In all life's tragic story there is the outline of a great white throne. Judgment is not an invention of the evangelists, or a bold guess of the apostolic mind. Judgment began in Eden. As soon as man was limited by laws, permissions, and prohibitions, he stood before a judgment-seat ; he might not know it, but he looked upon the face of a Judge. Blessed be God,

there is another and brighter thought; as soon as God showed any interest in man he began to redeem him. The first act of love necessitated the Cross. There was no stopping-place in the logic of mercy, until it consummated itself in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we could work that idea out we should in very deed be great theologians.

This is the method of God. Daily mercies are the cross in detail,—the Cross is the gathering up and assurance for the future of all other blessing. Take it by analysis, and we have the cross broken up into daily bread, and bodily clothing, and nightly sleep, and continual watchfulness—a detailed and tender Providence that numbers the very hairs of our head. Take it by synthesis, and all these things, little in themselves, are incomplete in themselves; put one down as a unit, add to it, gather in all the series, do not hesitate to include all the sections, phases, varieties of providence, and you will find your heart burning within you, love glowing in the soul, because you will soon come to see that you cannot stop until you come to a place called Golgotha. The moment God spoke to the sinner hopefully, he began to atone for the sinner's sin. It was one of two things: damnation or redemption. There is no middle point in all the purpose of God. Say that God spared Adam long enough to have a conversation with him, in which the words, "The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent," occurred, and the whole catastrophe is involved in that communication. Do not let us break up God's providence. Do not fritter away God's meanings. When he made one grass blade to grow, he meant to clothe the earth with roses and flowers of summer; when he caused one little pearl dewdrop to settle upon the earth, he meant to fertilise the globe and make it fruitful in all goodness and loveliness; when he spoke to the sinner and did not scourge him with eternal damnation, he meant by that restrained look that he would one day send forth his Son, made of a woman, born under the law, to redeem and restore all things. This is a great prophecy, and we should be greater men if we yielded ourselves to the teaching which God has provided in his Book.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, when thy judgments are abroad in the earth the inhabitants thereof will learn righteousness. Speak unto us, we humbly pray thee in the name of Jesus Christ thy Son, not in the language of judgment but in the language of mercy. We cannot bear the light of thy holiness, for we have sinned, and we are corrupt, and there is no health in us. We would look upon thy pity and love, thy Cross, O thou Emmanuel, God with us. We turn towards thy Cross, and our burden soon melts away ; we hear the gospel of thy love, and answering it with penitence and faith, behold we enter upon the enjoyment of new heavens and a new earth : old things are passed away, and all things have become new. This is the glory of thy gospel, thou Christ of God ; it banishes all night, and gloom, and winter, and death ; it brings life and immortality to light ; it causes heaven to condescend to earth, and lifts up earth into the horizon of the sky. May we understand thy gospel to be a call to discipline as well as to pardon. Having the promises of God, may we purify ourselves, may we answer love with holiness. May the spirit of love dwell in us, that our life may be one of heavenly charitableness, feeling sympathy in relation to those who are lost and needy, and in mortal pain ; may we enter into all the mystery of the ministry of Christ, who went about doing good. Thus may we confirm in action what we say in words, and live in the midst of men the prayers which we breathe in the sanctuary. For all gospel words and gospel light and gospel hope we bless thee : they make the wilderness blossom as the rose ; they abolish death, they dry up the tears of sorrow, and replace them with the tears of joy. We bless thee that joy hath her sweet tears, that joy cannot express herself wholly in laughter, but must blind herself with gracious rain, whereby all things bright and beautiful are multiplied and seen the more vividly. We give our lives into thy keeping. They are strange mysteries : they blaspheme, and pray ; sometimes they are ecstatic with piety more than earthly, and sometimes they wallow in the depths of hell. But our lives are thine ; the image they bear is not ours ; nothing but the flaw, the fault, the corruptness, can be claimed by us ; the glory, the suggestion, the budding immortality—these are God's. God's name be praised ! Watch the evolution of our lives, that we may grow in grace and knowledge and truth and pureness, and though sometimes we may seem to be worsted in the fight may we come again to the battle with recruited power, with completer energy, with more absolute consecration to the banner of Christ. Pity all who are weak and sad, sore of heart, wounded in spirit ; lead the blind by a way that they know not ; comfort the disconsolate with solaces from the Cross ;

minister unto those that can no more minister unto themselves ; and give us all to feel that we are in the keeping of God, under the direction of the eternal Spirit, and that what is asked of us by thee is filial obedience, complete consent of the heart, willingness to be and to do all that is included in the will of God. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us king's and priests unto God and his Father ; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Chapter xxiii.

INNER HISTORY.

THE whole chapter relates to the destiny of Tyre. History has confirmed the prophecy to the letter. Jesus Christ himself referred to the destiny of Tyre and Sidon. The Tarshish of this chapter is Spain. Chittim is the island of Cyprus. The word "merchant" is the same word that is rendered in other places "Canaanite." The Canaanites were the most energetic commercial men of their time. To be a merchant was to be a Canaanite ; to be a Canaanite was to be a merchant, substantially. With these points of antiquity the general mass of the people have nothing to do. Yet with the inner history which lies under all these marvellous accidents the world must be concerned until the end of time.

For example, the world must come, however slowly, to recognise the fact that rulers themselves are ruled ; that nations are units ; that empires are limited ; that the Lord reigneth. There can be only one Supreme. It would seem as if all pluralism were but accidental—that in unity we must find character, purpose, power, issue, and destiny. There are many volumes, but the only volume which holds them all, in so far as they are true, is the Bible. There are many kings, but they all have a King over them—eternal, immortal, invisible, the only Potentate ; all others are dramatic kings, painted figures, useful or useless, as the case may be ; but the King of glory reigneth, and all gates fly back at his coming, and all doors lift themselves up in sign of welcome, and in token of his right to come. Nations take a great deal of education in this matter, as indeed do individuals. What a glorious dawn is that which will shine above the eastern hills when the world begins to feel that it is reigned over, governed,

guided in all its march of progress; that every throb of it is but the echo of a throb profounder still :—

“All Nature is but art unknown to thee;
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood,
And partial evil, universal good.”

The world grows warmer under that recognition. At first the recognition is terrible enough, but it becomes more and more beneficent as things shape themselves, as dumb things begin to sing, and things that looked impracticable and unmanageable fall into order, and consent to the universal economy. Unless we get some larger view like this we shall be the victims of circumstances; every little Napoleon that cares to be haughty to the ambassador of a foreign court may set us up in an attitude of alarm. Be quiet with religious tranquillity. Things are not ordered by the whims and moods of petty toy-kings: they come and go, they die of diseases, like dogs; they have no philosopher's stone in their pouch; they are but a smoke, as we are: the Lord reigneth. When nations come to understand this, the earth shall yield her increase, the whole world shall be a harvest-field, and there shall be no want in our streets, no cry of atheistic pain.

The world must come, secondly, to recognise the fact that even empires are dependent upon character for their existence. Where are the testimonials? What is their record? It is all written. The greatest man cannot do without his references. Under many circumstances he may pass freely, because a good deal will be assumed regarding him; but there will come a point—call it, if you will, Day of Judgment; it is a solemn, grand term—when empires must put down their record, and stand or fall by what they have done. The individuals make the nation. When the individuals are right the nation cannot be wrong. It is not within our compass to deal with countries, empires, great lands, all at once; but we can deal with the little children, we can begin at some point of reformation or culture, and be faithful to the sphere which that point indicates; and thus every one of us can be helping the regeneration of the world. It is possible that we may be wasting much energy by imagining that because we cannot control an empire we cannot educate a life. Our empire

may be the little house-empire—all the young forces that throb about the hearthstone and the table. Or we may have some wizardry of eloquence that can touch people who will not go to church. Or we may have that secret of sympathy which makes the whole world kin. Do not suppose that we are to wait until we have energy enough to make the whole world hear us; we may begin with the very first child that comes in our way—yea, with the dying man who has but an hour to live; even in him we may, by God's blessing, cause to flash up that divinity which men call light.

We cannot read this history without feeling how true it is in all its moral outline and issue. For Tyre we may substitute London, Paris, New York, or the countries which they indicate. It is only the letter of this chapter which is ancient; the principle is energetic evermore. There is a tone of bitterness in the chapter, a tone of what is distinctively Scriptural irony—that acid, biting tone of old Elijah. “Pass ye over to Tarshish” (ver. 6). That is an ironical expression. The people are mocked when through sin they have lost their strength. Go away to your remotest colony, and sit down with those whom you have called tributaries and dependents. O thou once overfed and over-pampered glutton, go sit down in the kitchen when the fire is out, and make a banquet for thyself on thy memory! How proud had Tyre been! How she thrived upon her corn trade in Egypt! Egypt had no timber, and therefore could not build ships; and if she had had a whole Bashan full of oaks she never would have cut a plank, for Egypt from time immemorial detested the sea. You never caught an Egyptian on the sea if he could stow himself away anywhere else. The Tyrian liked the sea, did not care how broad it was, or deep; he had a spirit of locomotion and daring and enterprise, and wherever the corn was the man of Tyre might be seen. Tyre enriched herself with the harvests of the Nile; she thought Sihor flowed for her advantage; the harvest of the river was her revenue, and she was a mart of nations. Honour to whom honour is due. She had acquired a great position in the world, and therefore she must have had elements of character of conspicuous value. It is idle to deny the energy, the capacity, the force of any man who has ascended to the top and planted his

banner there. He has to be accounted for, and reckoned with; and he will never be brought down by sneers. Tyre was a haughty lady. To know what Tyre was we have only to read Ezekiel xxvi.-xxviii. There we have a full-length portraiture of Tyrus; "O thou that art situate at the entry of the sea, which art a merchant of the people for many isles, Thus saith the Lord God; O Tyrus, thou hast said, I am of perfect beauty. Thy borders are in the midst of the seas, thy builders have perfected thy beauty. They have made all thy ship boards of fir trees of Senir: they have taken cedars from Lebanon to make masts for thee. Of the oaks of Bashan have they made thine oars; the company of the Ashurites have made thy benches of ivory, brought out of the isles of Chittim. Fine linen with brodered work from Egypt was that which thou spreadest forth to be thy sail; blue and purple from the isles of Elishah was that which covered thee" (Ezek. xxvii. 3-7). Only a prophet dare have challenged such strength and splendour. The prophecies should be read not retrospectively but prospectively, as they were uttered, and we should see the great men of old hurling their thunders against evident might, pomp, grandeur, settled and immutable reputation.

A wonderful thing is this, that when the Spirit of God is in a man he cares for no city, how great soever it may be, though he himself may not have whereon to lay his head. There is, however, a spirit in him which makes him greater than all the capitals of the world, were they added to one another and constituted into one great avenue of capitals, each house in all the vista crowned or starred with the sceptre thrust from every window. The Galilean fishermen cared nothing for the pomp of Jerusalem; old prophets with ragged mantles on their stooping shoulders hurled divinest judgment against proud kings. The Church has lost this prophetic inspiration, and now she bows down to worldly greatness, and tells with delight that a chariot and pair has driven up to her front door. To what a cant of indignity has she sunk, even in her very speech! She is now an "influential" Church, a "respectable" Church, an "intelligent" Church, a Church possessed of "exceptional advantages," and most careful about her "reputation"! So the world pays its copper tribute, and says to the Church, Behave yourself! let us

do what we like, and you sing your hymns and go up to heaven like any other vapour. Where are the men who can do without food, clothing, shelter? Where are the men who would spurn any offer of patronage?—sons of lightning, sons of judgment; men who never sit down to eat, but snatch their apple as they hasten along the road that they may keep their next appointment to thunder judgment upon unrighteousness, and break in pieces with an iron rod the vessel of impurity.

Tyre is called “the crowning city” (ver. 8). The speaker cannot drop his satire; he has got accustomed to it now; he is in his best vein of mockery. The crowning city was Tyre because she distributed crowns to the Phœnician colonies,—so to say, she kept a whole cupboard full of crowns, and took one out after another, and gave to the little colonies that they might play at being kingdoms. “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.” But Tyre was proud of her dignities! “Haran, and Canneh, and Eden, the merchants of Sheba, Asshur, and Chilmad, were thy merchants. There were thy merchants in all sorts of things, in blue clothes, and brodered work, and in chests of rich apparel, bound with cords, and made of cedar, among thy merchandise. The ships of Tarshish did sing of thee in thy market: and thou wast replenished, and made very glorious in the midst of the seas” (Ezek. xxvii. 23–25). Then the “rowers” of Tyre—the men who, so to speak, rowed the beautiful city as upon a river—brought her into great waters, and whilst she was there the east wind broke her. O that east wind! that eternal resource of God! So Tyre was overwhelmed:—

“The desolator desolate,
The victor overthrown,
The arbiter of others’ fate
A suppliant for her own.”

But the question arose: Who did all this? How did all this come to pass? The answer is sublime:—

“The Lord of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth. . . . He stretched out his hand over the sea, he shook the kingdoms: the Lord hath given a commandment against the merchant city, to destroy the strongholds thereof” (vers. 9, 11).

There is a “who” in history. We find that *who* in the

eighth verse: "Who hath taken this counsel against Tyre?" "Who" is not a word we apply to a dog, but to a man, to one reasonable, responsible. Yet who could apply the term to a mere man under such peculiar circumstances? No man could have done it. We never ask, with any idea of receiving for an answer that a man did it, "Who set the sun in his tabernacle?" Did it ever occur to any one to say, "Two men lifted the burning load to that altitude"? The answer would be received with a derisive smile. There are some things which man could not have done. God reconstructs geography. He is not only the Geologist of the globe, but its Geographer. The God that built up the rocks managed all the surface work. God readjusts the map of the world; he alters names, boundaries, capacities; the four seasons are his servants, and he tells them what to do. At this very time Chittim, or Cyprus, revolted against Tyre, and the Phœnician colonies began to be restless, and they too joined Sennacherib when he attacked the mother city. There are colonies that will not always be colonies. Who did it? God shook the kingdoms: Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylon, Syria, Israel, Judah, quaked down to their foundations, whilst Tiglath-Pileser was building and glorifying the Assyrian Empire, as if he were a species of god: and in due time his neck was to be wrung, and he was to be thrown away, because there cannot be two Almighties.

"Pass over to Chittim" (ver. 12). Here we have the irony again. Go into the little island, shrink within the smallest bounds: O thou mighty England, Great Britain and Ireland, go and sit upon a stone, and dine upon gravel and sand! "Behold the land of the Chaldeans" (ver. 13). What is the meaning of that challenge? The meaning is that Tyre learned from Chaldea. Let one country learn from another. Do not let history be wasted upon our statesmen and leaders and merchants. Study the history of the world if you would study the history of your own town. Always read the little in the light of the great. Be sure to have the right atmosphere, the right point of view, the right perspective, or you may be imagining that a thing is great only because it is near. The philologist does not scruple to say that if a man knows only one

language he knows none. There is an obvious sense in which that is true. It may be said to be distinctively and peculiarly true of the English tongue, which has about it the flavour of nearly all countries, and is the most difficult of all languages to acquire. So it is about our business, about our parish, about our city, and about our country : we know nothing about any of these until we know something about the whole scheme of things. We must know that even a straight line drawn upon a globe dips, and loses its straightness. We must remember that a city, any city, how proud, great, mighty, rich soever, is to be judged in the light of the history of cities. Tyre must ponder Chaldea.

How true the Bible is to itself in making everything turn upon character ! Now what have you done ? What is your spirit ? Are you haughty or humble ? Is your greatness moral, or only financial ? What is covered by your fine linen with brodered work from Egypt ? Do you cover wounds and bruises with these decorated plasters ? What is your soul ? This is God's answer. " Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyrus, Thus saith the Lord God ; Because thine heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a god, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas ; yet thou art a man, and not God, though thou set thine heart as the heart of God : behold, thou art wiser than Daniel ; there is no secret that they can hide from thee : with thy wisdom and with thine understanding thou hast gotten thee riches, and hast gotten gold and silver into thy treasures : by thy great wisdom and by thy traffick hast thou increased thy riches, and thine heart is lifted up because of thy riches : therefore thus saith the Lord God ; Because thou hast set thine heart as the heart of God ; behold, therefore I will bring strangers upon thee, the terrible of the nations : and they shall draw their swords against the beauty of thy wisdom, and they shall defile thy brightness. They shall bring thee down to the pit, and thou shalt die the deaths of them that are slain in the midst of the seas " (Ezek. xxviii. 2-8). The Lord will not have two gods. He will not have any rival. " Wilt thou yet say before him that slayeth thee, I am God ? but thou shalt be a man, and no God, in the hand of him that slayeth thee. Thou shalt die the deaths

of the uncircumcised by the hand of strangers : for I have spoken it, saith the Lord God" (Ezek. xxviii. 9, 10). The rampant boaster should be brought down to the dust. Our strength is in our modesty. What hast thou that thou hast not received ? We have seen men of boastful temper, who have mocked others, sold up in the public market-place without a soul to buy in a chair for the overthrown boaster to sit down upon. Character is everything. Character is dignity. There may be no money in the bank, but see how the head holds itself up, and how the eye has an upward turn in it that means, I seek a country out of sight ; I am but a stranger and a pilgrim, with hardly time to put off my sandals and lay down my staff ; I yearn for the city of light. Character is courage. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth : but the righteous are bold as a lion." What is this character ? It can only be a creation of God. Character is not one of the arts or manufactures. There is less manipulation about a character than about anything else. A picture may be painted, but not a character. Character is the real man, the inward soul-man, the spirit-man, the very plasm of being. Blessed be God that it is so, for otherwise how many men would be mistaken : they are so rough externally, they have had so few advantages ; they have been battled against and overthrown, until quite a tone of defiance has entered into their daily speech, but in their souls they are chastened, and refined, and pure, and trustful. This is the miracle of God. Character only can be regenerated and reconstructed and guaranteed by all the energy of heaven. "Ye must be born again." We have greater advantages than ever Tyre had : how are we using them ? "I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you." Let us consider this well, and be wise.

Chapter xxiv.

SELF OVERTHROWN.

A CHAPTER like this will bear many readings. A quaint commentator has said, "This is gallant rhetoric, compared with which the thunders of Demosthenes are poor stuff." The man who wrote that knew every word that Demosthenes had ever said in his greatest orations. How true it is that there is no eloquence like the eloquence of the Bible! The difficulty is that people will not read it. The twenty-fourth chapter and the twenty-seventh, and all between, should be read at once, for all these chapters constitute only one prophecy. Those who are fond of literature should read the chapters, if only as a specimen of sublimest rhetoric. How eagerly men buy rhetorical specimens! and with what haste and eagerness they flee to hear men speak of literature! All literature is in the Bible. There is *nothing* outside God's Book. Infinite variations there are, of course, but the meaning is that all these variations, in so far as they are true, tuneful, helpful to man's deepest life, come back to the Bible as water returns to its source.

In this and three following chapters the Lord undertakes to deal with the great world-powers, and he shows that they are but as straws in his hand. In the ancient world, Assyria was the symbol of power, and the Lord shows that Assyria is but a painted egg-shell; and as for Moab, it is a frail vessel, broken by the finger of God merely pointing at it. It is needful, it would appear, for our human education that now and again the earth in all its amplitude should be treated with divine contempt. Men have always said that the land would be left; even consolidated funds might sink or vary in value, or go down to an infinitesimal point, but the land would always be there. It was necessary, therefore, that now and again in history God should

claim the land, and shake out of it all the buildings that men had put upon it as if they were going to claim the land. "The earth is the Lord's." If he lends it to us for a little time to build our huts upon, see that those huts have altars in them, for the Lord of the land will come down and shake them out of the earth as a thing that is vomited because of its nauseousness. It is well that we should know what kind of house we are living in. It is good that rarely and distantly the earth should quake. It looks like a strong house, but it is not. The rocks flow away like water, and the mountains go up in smoke when the Lord looks on them in the spirit of judgment. The twenty-fourth chapter riddles the world, minces it, chops it up into the smallest pieces; throws them away, gathers them, and begins the history of the earth in a new chapter. Here we have all the glory of civilisation, and the whole thing ruined, brought down to its protoplasm, and out of that plasma there is begun again all the fabric of the world. Wise men cannot afford to hasten with indecent eagerness over a poem so historically founded, so philosophically illustrated.

Look at the word "Behold" (ver. 1). That word is never thrown into the Scripture as a mere make-weight. It is not an exclamation; it is a warning, it is a solemn appeal; it is the setting-up of a great hand, pointing towards an object weirdly fascinating, sublimely entrancing, or an object awful because indicative of a fast-descending judgment. "Behold the Lord maketh the earth empty." The figure is that of a ship in a storm, and so distressing is the situation that an order is given to lighten the vessel. When that order is given men throw overboard corn and wine and precious burdens—let them go, if haply life may be saved! What a market-place is that! That is the true market-place. Other market-places are ironies as to values, and barter, and exchanges. When it becomes a question of life and death, and there is a possibility of saving life by throwing out whole caskets of jewels, let the jewels be thrown out; they will make a splash as if they were but paving-stones; the sea will receive them with indifference or contempt. Men should profoundly study this fact, because there may come a time when it will be practically tested. We know as a matter of fact that all this has been done, and so long as it forms part of human

history the preacher has a mighty threshing instrument in his hand, whereby he may do wonders for the Lord. They are wise who prize the true gold, whose souls are committed unto the faithful Redeemer for custody. Blessed are they who are in the Father's keeping, for no man can pluck them out of the Father's hand. Keep the image steadily in view, then. How far does this emptying proceed? It proceeds to the very uttermost—"and turneth it upside down." How do we best prove that a vessel is really empty? Simply by that action. Unless that action be completed, there may remain a drop, a dreg, a fleck, a particle in the vessel that we intended to empty; therefore, take it, turn it upside down, and let it stand there for hours, and the draining will be completed. Thus the earth is treated like a little bottle. In the hands of God it is all but invisible. Is there not also a stroke of a contemptuous kind in this action of inversion? How could we show our contempt for a man more than by taking him up and setting him on his head, and leaving him there until we returned at leisure? Mockery could no further go. Contempt exhausts itself in that action. Then the Lord "scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof." Is there a more pitiable spectacle anywhere than to see men running away from danger? They care nothing for dress, for equipage; they stand not on the order of their going, but go. And is there anything more suggestive and more provocative of scornful laughter than to see men fleeing from danger? Let the danger be a fatal one. Then call out to the men—Have you your pass-book with you? Ask a man about his pass-book when the earth is swallowing him up, and then you will know something of relative values and true ways of living. Call out to a man who is pursued by a wolf if he has taken with him his favourite snuff-box. Ask him to be sure about it. He is so proper when he is lord of the manor, so exact when all things are done by a nod of his imperial head. Ask him now when the wolf is barking at him if all his appointments are just as he would like them to be. What is his purpose? To be saved: If all I have will satisfy this wolf, thrust it down his throat—only let me escape his cruel teeth! The argument is right. The only difficulty is that men will not carry it out. When the wolf has retired they come back again to repeat their vanities.

In the second verse we have a picture of social confusion :—

“And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usury, so with the giver of usury to him” (ver. 2).

Distinctiveness is lost. And what is society without its distinctiveness? Even a democracy must be graded. We cannot get up and down the world without ladders and staircases, and it is right that we should know what it is to ascend and to descend, for therein lies no little part of our best education. How thin is the partition which divides order from confusion! Once alter an eternal law, or trifle with it, or ignore it, and all the card-house of civilisation tumbles like paper. The great thing to be kept in mind is, that men may be as if they were not in all the relations of life; they may be masters without claiming to be such; it is in the unwise assertion of the name and claim that mischief begins. Master and servant there will ever be; head and foot is a relation which will never be dissolved; upper and lower are terms we shall always need in human speech; but there need be no boasting, no haughtiness, no oppression, no foolish vanity. The great man will always go straight up to the throne, or if not straight up yet through a great battlefield to it, and he will never rest until he sits down there, and until all men say with one consent, God save the king! Let him reign by reason of force of character, capacity of mind, prophetic insight, generous sympathy, noble affection for every living man and beast and bird. There is no safety in confusion. Nor is progress possible in chaos. We must have lines, boundaries, distinctions, badges and tokens if you will, but within them all there may throb the heart of generous brotherhood.

“The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world languisheth and fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish” (ver. 4).

Why? Because the vital spring is weakened. Always distinguish between the interior and the exterior, between the kernel and the shell, between the core and that which is protective of it. A man may lose a great deal of his body, and yet still keep his life; his arms may be taken from him, but he can still think; his lower limbs may be severed from him, yet he may rule an empire by his wisdom; he may be deaf and blind and dumb,

yet men may wish to consult him because of something in him that is in no one else. But when the life is touched, then the whole fabric collapses, and no matter how lofty the stature, how strong the limb, how trained the muscle, when the life went the whole man fell. There is an inner mystery of things; an esoteric pulse and secret. There is a place in life where the ark stands. When men built the tabernacle they brought the ark into it, and the ark consecrated all; and when they built a new house, brighter and greater, it was the old ark that was put in. There may be a new temple, but no new ark. 'Take it! however many years it has been in use, it is better than all the fir and algarum wood of Lebanon, richer than the gold of Parvaim. So with this mysterious thing within the tabernacle or temple of man. When the spirit of truth is insulted, all nature becomes old, palsied, withered; when the spirit of moral loveliness is quenched, then the land is utterly emptied and utterly spoiled: "The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world languisheth and fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish." Is the image that of a tree that has been thunderstruck? Is it not possible to perforate a tree, and to pour through the perforation so as to get at the juices some fatal acid, some deadly fluid? Now seal up the hole with clay, paint it like the rest of the great trunk of the tree, and leave the mischief to proceed. The great branches will shrivel, the little twigs will soon give in, and by-and-by the whole tree that stood up like part of a cathedral will begin to fall, wither, perish, like a thing that has been blighted with a curse. Let us take care lest some such cruel acid be infused into us that shall work the mischief of death; lest we be stung by fiery flying serpents; for then there is nothing left but mourning, fading, languishing—the grim programme of paralysis!

"The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left" (vers. 5, 6).

How familiar is this story to those who are Bible-readers! The accusation is once more a moral one. What had the inhabitants of the earth done? "Transgressed the laws, changed

the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant." Not, they have transgressed minor laws about which there may be debate, changed ordinances of human appointment and institution ; but, they have broken laws and ordinances that are associated with the everlasting covenant—the unwritten and unwritable law. Here a broad distinction must be made between things that are outward and things that are inward, between things transient and things everlasting. It is never wise to transgress a law. Even where the law itself is open to amendment, it must be approached patiently and steadfastly with a view to its being legitimately and constitutionally changed. Its transgression must be a solemn and final act, done not in hot blood, but done by men who have just risen from their knees in an act of worship and adoration. It is never well to change an ordinance hastily, merely for the sake of changing it. Ordinances even of an imperfect kind help to keep society steady, to centralise it, to suggest standards of judgment and criticism, to mark points of progress. There is an everlasting covenant that man not having written may not unwrite, or attempt to obliterate or to mutilate in any degree. That everlasting covenant must be good, because it could come only from one Lawgiver, and his name is God. If in very deed it is an "everlasting" covenant, by that very qualification it defines itself as a covenant made by the living Lord. Seek out his law, hide it in your heart, love it more than you love your daily bread, and they who thus honour the Lord's law shall be delivered and comforted, brought to the highest point of spiritual culture, and set in the infinite security of heaven. Who does not rejoice that there is a spirit of judgment in the universe? A languishing world should give us pleasure ; a fading tree, provided that tree is an upas tree, should make us shout for joy. When the bad man is brought to justice, righteous men should sing the praises of God. When the thief is caught, when the evildoer feels the cold hand of justice on his neck, they who look on should bless God for these guarantees of legitimate and useful civilisation. That there is a perdition for the Iscariots of the world is a source of profoundest satisfaction to those who love righteousness. Were Iscariot to be free of heaven, there would be no heaven to long for. The curse is personified as a beast of prey—"therefore hath the curse devoured the earth." Sometimes it is personified

under the image of fire, for fire devours, swallows up, eats up, and leaves nothing undigested. Oh that fierce tongue of fire !
 "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

"The new wine mourneth, the vine languisheth, all the merryhearted do sigh" (ver. 7).

It is no good having vineyards now, for the vines themselves are rotten, and there is no wine for the lips that burn for it.

"The mirth of tabrets [or tambourines] ceaseth, the noise of them that rejoice endeth, the joy of the harp ceaseth. They shall not drink wine with a song; strong drink shall be bitter to them that drink it" (vers. 8, 9).

When a man's own palate turns against him, and he has lived for nothing but the palate, he has a sorry world to live in. So long as he could gorge himself at the glutton's table he was as happy as a beast could be, but now he cannot eat, and he never could pray, so what becomes of him ?

"There is a crying for wine in the streets; all joy is darkened, the mirth of the land is gone" (ver. 11).

A beautiful image is suggested by the expression "joy is darkened." The literal rendering is, "it is eventide with joy,"—that is to say, the shadows are gathering, cold twilight is setting in upon joy, and joy itself presently will throw away its harp and its song, and will lie down to die.

Thus the reading of this chapter is like being out in a tremendous thunderstorm. The wheel of judgment flies through all these verses. How it thunders ! How it grinds ! How it crushes ! How pitiless is its action ! When could the Lord ever conclude even a speech of judgment without a word of gospel ? It is difficult for God to give way to judgment exclusively. It is his strange work—mercy is his delight. So from the thirteenth verse the gospel begins :—

"When thus it shall be in the midst of the land among the people, there shall be as the shaking of an olive tree, and as the gleaning grapes when the vintage is done" (ver. 13).

There shall be something left that God can work upon. If there be one little wheat-head left, he will plant it, and have a harvest out of that by-and-by ; if there is one little green sprout on all the fallen tree, he will water it, and watch it, and care for

it, and presently it shall grow and bear fruit, and the birds shall sing in its branches. If when God has crushed a man by taking from him his first-born and his last-born, and stabbing his favourite scheme with sharp spears so that it perish in the sight of men, yet if there be left in that suffering one so much as a feeble sigh—if he can sigh for God, if he can say, Woe is me ! God pity me ! the Lord will work upon that, and out of it there will come a new man, crowned like a king, enriched and adorned with riches spiritual. A germ is left in the worst of us. If we are even reading one word of the Bible, there is something to begin with. If we have not quenched the Spirit, the Spirit may conquer yet. That God's Book is in our hands, and that we are in God's house, by will, by consent, is proof that even yet the prodigal may return, the farthest wanderer may come home. If this is not the spirit of the gospel, then there is no gospel. The evangelical doctrine is a doctrine of infinite hopefulness. When men profess to be evangelical, and yet are stern, then they belie their profession by their spirit : they have evangelical words, not evangelical solicitudes ; they have an evangelical framework, but there is no heart evangelical throbbing within the ghastly skeleton. The evangelical spirit goes out, and says, If there is a sigh in you, one tear, one sign of penitence, God has not given you up : work upon it ; point to that as the beginning of new riches and infinite treasures. Where is there a man who can say that he never has a religious thought, a spiritual aspiration, a keen desire for some larger vision of the kingdom of God ? If we are haunted by one such pale spectre, we may take hope that even yet we may be saved. Infinite is the grace of God. Some have been sorely shaken, impoverished, overwhelmed, and it would seem as if God had been hard with them, and had well-nigh taken away the last crust from their table ; but, no, there is a crust on the table, you say ? Yes. That crust is a pledge that God is still in the house. Ask him to bless it, and it will become as an abundant harvest.

Chapter xxv.

CALM AFTER STORM.

WE can only understand the highest, sweetest meaning of this chapter in proportion as we enter into the spirit of the one which precedes it. That chapter we have read and studied. It is full of clouds, and darkness, and judgment. The Lord himself seems to have yielded to the spirit of contempt, and to have held in scorn even the work of his own fingers. The sarcasm of the Lord is intolerable. His laugh, who can stand? It is a laugh of judgment; it comes after certain moral experiments, and endeavours, and issues; it is not frivolity, it is a singular aspect of judgment, the only aspect which certain men in certain moods can understand; for they have withstood mercy, and compassion, and tears, and they have seen God himself in an attitude of supplication, in the posture of a suppliant and a beggar, and they have turned him from their heart-door. The only thing which he can now do is to laugh at their calamity, and mock when their fear cometh. We have walked through the dark valley of the preceding chapter, and now we come to a calm after a storm, to a sweet and beauteous song, to an eventide that carries the burden of its waning light easily, and that shines upon us with mellowest, most comforting sympathy. Who could claim such a God as a refuge? An hour or two ago he thundered in the heavens as Almightiness alone can thunder; nothing was sacred to him that defied him by its bulk and power and pride; he turned the earth upside down and laughed at its impotent endeavours at rectification. Who can flee to him, and call him by all these tender names—a strength, a refuge, a shadow, a sanctuary?

The very terribleness of God is a reason for putting our trust in him. Probably this view of the divine attributes has not

always been sufficiently vivid to our spiritual consciousness. We have thought of God, and have become afraid; whereas when we hear him thundering, and see him scattering his arrows of lightning round about him, and behold him pouring contempt upon the mighty who have defied him, we should say, See! God is love. What does he strike? No little child, no patient woman, no broken heart, no face that is steeped in tears of contrition. On what does his fist fall? On arrogance, on haughtiness, on self-conceit, on self-completeness. He turns the proud away with an answer of scorn to their prayer of patronage. God is only terrible to evil. That is the reason why his terribleness should be an encouragement and an allurements to souls that know their sin and plead for pardon at the Cross.

In the fourth verse we find what we may term a completing view of the divine personality and government. Say whether there is aught in poetry that streams from a fountain with this fluency:—

“Thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall” (ver. 4).

Here we come upon language which the heart can understand, and which the heart responds to with personal gratitude. Sometimes the Scriptures leave us. They are like a great bird with infinite wings, flying away to the centres of light and the origin of glory, and we cannot follow them in their imperial infinite sweep; then they come down to us and flutter near our hearts, and speak or sing to us in words and tones we can comprehend. This verse is an instance in point. Every man who has had large experience of life can annotate this verse for himself; he needs no critic, no preacher, no orator, to help him into the innermost shrine and heart of this holy place. Each of us can repeat this verse as a part of his own biography: each can say, Thou hast been a strength to me when I was poor; I never knew my poverty when thou didst break the bread; we always thought it more than enough because the blessing so enlarged the morsel: thou hast been a strength to me in my need and in my distress; when my father and my mother forsook me thou didst take me up; thou didst turn my tears into jewellery,

thou didst make my sorrows the beginnings of pæans and hymns of loud and perfect triumph : thou hast been a refuge from the storm ; when men could not bear me, tolerate me, see anything in me to touch their complacency ; when the roof was broken through by the weighty rain, and when the flood put out the last spark of fire, I never felt the cold because thou wast near me, and in the multitude of my thoughts within me thy comforts delighted my soul. Thou hast been a shadow from the heat ; I could always fly to thee at noontide, and rest in thine almightiness as a flock gathers itself around the great tree, and tarries for a while during the sultry noontide. So long as men can say this, with all the passion of earnestness, with all the vividness of personal consciousness, the Bible smiles at every attempt to overthrow its supremacy, and waits to take in the last wanderer from its hospitable shelter. Remember, therefore, when reading passages that are surcharged with judgment, verses that are all lightning, Scriptures that are hot as hell with God's anger, that other Scriptures must be quoted if we would realise a completing view of God, as to his personality and government and purpose ; and the last and uppermost verdict will be, "God is love." When God once begins to be gracious, turns away from judgment, and dawns upon the world's consciousness like a new morning, who can tell what he will do ? He gives with both hands ; he withholds nothing ; he not only causes the storm to cease, he proceeds to positive hospitality, goodness, beneficence ; he comes down to us to search into our need in all its extent and urgency, and crowns the day with infinite satisfactions.

Now he will make a feast, and the table shall be spread upon the mountain where it can be well seen ; it shall be a grand public feast, and the angels shall sound the banquet trumpet, and call the hungriest first to eat God's bread. He will deign to take up Oriental figures in order to express the amplitude of his provision, and the lavishness of his proposal to feed and bless the race : The Lord of hosts will make a feast "unto all people" (ver. 6). What a gospel word is that—"all people." He only singled out one people that he might get at the rest. He never elected any one to stop at. He began by constructing a nation

that he might by-and-by make a peculiar nation of the whole earth, and speak of his earth-church to all the other stars; and might he not in speaking of it speak almost with the boast of divine love? The feast shall be a feast "of fat things,"—an expression fully understood by the Oriental mind. "A feast of wines on the lees,"—wines that had rested long and become clarified, and have developed their richest flavour. "Of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined,"—as if repetition were needed to assure those who are called to the banquet that God had left nothing undone. When did God ever perform half a miracle? When did God say, I can do no more—I must return and complete this when my strength is recruited? When he lights this little earth there is more light runs off the edges to light other worlds than the little earth itself could contain; the earth has not room enough to contain the sun's hospitality of glory. So throughout all the economy of providence, God's measure is good—good measure, pressed down, heaped up, running over, any image that will express fulness, largeness, repletion, redundancy. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. A poor Deity, indeed, if our little fluttering wing could climb to any pinnacle of his! Who can understand not only the power but the generosity and beneficence of God?

But how can those who are in the mountain banquet-house be happy while death is ravaging down below? The Lord says in reference to that, that he "will swallow up death in victory" (ver. 8). We must not amend that expression—"swallow up." There is a sound in it which is equal to an annotation. We hear a splash in the infinite Atlantic, and the thing that is sunk has gone for ever. It was but a stone. Death is to be not mitigated, relieved, thrown into perspective which the mind can gaze upon without agony; it is to be swallowed up. Let it go! Death has no friends. Who names the ghastly monster with healthy pleasure? Who brings Death willingly to the feast? asks him to join the dance? begs him to tarry through the night, and weave stars of glory in the robe of gloom? Death has no friends. He is to be swallowed up, slain, forgotten. Yet in another aspect how gracious has death been in human history!

What pain he has relieved ; what injuries he has thrust into the silent tomb ; what tumult and controversy he has ended. Men have found an altar at the tomb, a house of reconciliation in the graveyard, music for the heart in the toll and throb of the last knell. Even Death must have his tribute. He may not work willingly. He never saw himself. Let us be just. When Death is dead, will there be some other way into the upper city that is paved with gold, and calm with eternal Sabbath ? Shall souls then ascend as did the Christ ? Will chariots of fire then bear them to the city everlasting ? Will angels then throng the house, and carry off the soul without wrench or pain, or need of heart-break and farewell ? How is it to be ? for Death is dead, Death is swallowed up. Will some larger sleep enclose us in its soothing embrace, and woo us as with the voice of whispered love to the land of summer, the paradise of God ? To our inquiries there is no reply in words. Yet may we not, even now, be so enabled to view death as to escape all its terrors ? Even now death is abolished. With Christ in the house there is no death—there is but a hastening shadow, a flutter, a spasm, a vision, and then the infinite calm.

The prophet is here standing upon an equality with the apostle. The Apostle Paul uses the very same words, enlarges the same thought, with ineffable delight and thankfulness : he, too, sees the time when this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality, and death shall be swallowed up in victory, and men shall almost mock death, and say, “ O death, where is thy sting ? O grave, where is thy victory ? ” It will be a noble avenging. Death has had long swing and rule and festival ; he has eaten millions at a meal ; what if the race should some day avenge itself upon the memory of death by noble song, not self-conceived but inspired by the very Christ who abolished death, and shall say tauntingly, “ O death, where is thy sting ? O grave, where is thy victory ? ” produce your weapons—produce your triumphs ! The avenging would not be unnatural or ignoble.

God has promised that a period shall be put to the reign of sorrow : “ God will wipe away tears from off all faces ” (ver. 8).

Can we not wipe away our own tears ? Never. If any man dry his own tears he shall weep again ; but if God dry our tears our eyes shall never lose their light. It all comes, therefore, to a consideration of this solemn question—Who shall put an end to this sorrow ? Shall we try frivolity—shall we drown our sorrows ; shall we banish our grief by pre-engaging our memory by things that die in their using ? Or shall we say, Thou living God of all joy, thou only canst put an end to human woe : make my heart glad, and then my face will shine ; take the guilt away from my conscience and my whole nature, and then my tears will cease to flow ? This is interior work, this is a spiritual miracle, this belongs to the reign of God and the ministry of grace. We resign ourselves, not passively and murmuringly, but actively and thankfully, to God, that he may make us glad with his own joy. The Lord awaits our consent to the drying of our tears.

Then God reveals himself by the overflowing abundance of his goodness :—

“And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God ; we have waited for him, and he will save us : this is the Lord ; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation ” (ver. 9).

How is a king's gift known ? Surely by its royalty of fulness, by its having upon it no mark or stain of grudging or littleness. How is God known in the earth ? By the very fulness of it ; by the attention which has been paid to secret places, to little corners, to tiny things, to threadlets that only a microscope can see. He has finished, so far, this world as if he had never had another world on which to lavish his generous care. We know God by the superabundance of the festival. He never gives merely enough. Yet he never exercises his dominion in wantonness and prodigality, but always with that economy which waits upon the wisest generosity. If we sin against the light we insult the whole noontide. It is no little artificial light that flickers in the infinite darkness that we despise, but a whole firmament of glory. If we sin against Providence, it is against a full table that we rebel ; and it is upon an abundant harvest that we pronounce our curse. The Lord leaves nothing half done, does nothing with a grudging hand, keeps back nothing for his own enrich-

ment. Doth not the goodness of the Lord lead thee to repentance? What a noble companion would Goodness make for any man who longed to go home again! Goodness, beginning with the spring, passing into the summer, reddening and purpling with the hospitable autumn—yes, and not scorning the field of snow and the wind all frost, for even there God keeps sanctuary and the Most High his testimony. Sinners, therefore, with an infinite turpitude are they who force their way to their lowest nature, to their original type, to the hell that awaits unrighteousness, through goodness so vast, so delicate, so infinite.

Are we surprised to find such delineations of God in the Old Testament? All these visions might have come before us from some apostolic standpoint. Who has taught us to talk about the "Old" Testament and the "New," as if they were issued from different heavens, and signed by different deities? "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord"—one thought, one purpose, one love. The Lamb was slain from before the foundation of the world: before there was any world to sin the sinning world was died for. Is this a mystery? only in words. Is this a contradiction? only in the letter. After long years of spiritual education the soul leaps up and says, Eureka! I have found it—I see it—I know the meaning now—thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift! When men turn their back upon the Old Testament they find no other. Even if they cling to the New Testament it is but half a book. The New Covenant can only be understood by those who are spiritually learned in the Old Covenant. The whole economy of God, in thought, in providence, in purpose, is one and indivisible. Then began the Christ of God at Moses, and the prophets, and the Psalms, and in all the Scriptures, to expound the things concerning himself. "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me." "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." "Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures." The ancient day came to the passing moment, and they constituted one bright morning; and in the light of that dawn they began to understand what might be meant by heaven.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, the great storm is thine, the mighty wind, the all-shaking tempest : the clouds are the dust of thy feet : all nature is but the garment which thou hast put on for a moment. Our life is thy care, for thou didst form man in thine image and thy likeness that he might show forth thy praise. Thou dost use all ministries for the perfecting of our manhood, even calamities and losses and sore scourgings ; these are processes by which thou dost bring us to fulness and assurance of sonship. They are hard to bear ; we tremble under thy stroke ; a cloud upon thy face destroys our heaven : yet we know not what we do when we murmur and complain. No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous ; but thou hast a purpose in it all, thou hast an afterwards, in which we shall see the vision perfectly, and understand the purpose, and call thy judgment Love. We will therefore put ourselves into thine hands, not of necessity, but consentingly, lovingly, wisely ; for of this are we persuaded, that we are but of yesterday, and know nothing ; we cannot tell what is best for us ; we form our policies only to see them destroyed ; we put up our plans, and behold they are thrown down by a strong wind. Better that thou shouldst rule, for all time, all space, lie naked to thine eye ; thou seest all things at once ; thou art Alpha and Omega : direct our lives, therefore, for us, and help us to cast all our care upon God, because he careth for us. We bless thee if we have come to this condition of soul : it is as the beginning of heaven, it brings sweet rest to the mind ; we now take no thought for the morrow, so long as we hold on by God's strength, and know that his will is best. But all this we have learned from thy Son Jesus Christ : he is our Teacher, we have been scholars in his school, and we have learned of him ; he spoke to us of the Father, of the Father's gentleness, and care, and love, and pity, and we listened to the music until it filled our souls, and we were enabled by thy strength to answer it with the gift of all our love. Henceforth we live not unto ourselves, but unto him who loved us, and bought us with his own blood. We would be Christ's wholly, body, soul, and spirit ; we would that his name were written upon every faculty of ours, and that Holiness unto the Lord were our one title, and the one seal by which we can be known. Let thy rough wind blow, yea, let thine east wind steal forth upon the earth, only give us to feel that above all the winds is the ruling power of love, is the eye of pity, is the purpose of wisdom ; then in the storm we shall find a resting-place, and in the roughest wind we shall bow before a secret altar where God will meet us, and give us joy in the midst of suffering. We cast ourselves into thy hands. Blessed are they who rest there : we hear a voice concerning them which says, No man shall pluck them out of my Father's hands. Amen.

Chapter xxv. 9.

"And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us."

GOD, A CONTINUAL DISCOVERY.

THE text reads like an exclamation, like a great utterance of glad surprise. We may discover in it the voice of people who have been long expecting deliverance, and have at length realised it. The text is, therefore, an exclamation. The exclamation is an argument. The argument is that God is a daily or continual discovery to the religious consciousness. He is always more than he was yesterday; the heart is continually exclaiming, This is what we have been waiting for; behold, this is the glory of God; every other thing we have seen is simple and common compared with what we now look upon. It is thus the visions of history come and go; but alway there stands right up in heaven's centre the astounding light, old as eternity, yet new as a surprise. We are not dissatisfied with the past, we do not compare the present and the past invidiously, or to the disadvantage of the past; we look upon all things that are gone as but introductory, symbolic, and that vision or truth which we hold here and now is the God we have been waiting for. Let us, so to say, have the God of to-day. He is not new; he is gathered history, he is focussed revelation; all that the prophets have spoken and the psalmists have sung concerning him we realise in his personality: and yet he is the God of to-day in a great, glad, solemn sense, the greatest that has revealed itself to the religious consciousness. That is orthodoxy—to be orthodox up to date, to seize the immediate vision, the present truth; not as something new, detached, isolated; but as the last flash of the ever-burning glory released to drive away some further reach of our great gloom. It is possible to hold on to the past, and yet to hold on to the present; and that is only truly modern which is ancient, and that is only truly worth keeping in antiquity which adapts itself to the immediate need of life's little day. We know what it is to be going through delightful and enchanting scenery. Hear the travellers: How beautiful is this land; how

goodly a land to live in ; how well the little cottage home would nestle on that slope or near yonder wood ! Let a few miles be passed, and they say, No, this is the place—bolder, finer altogether in every landscape feature, more fresh air here : this is the place ! A few miles farther on, and why is the party dumb ? Some are blind with tears, all are silent : what is this ? They have just beheld the Jungfrau, its majestic figure, its unspeakable purity, and their tears say, This—this ! Do they despise the simpler country through which they have come ? Not at all : but for that simpler country they never could have come to this great vision ; they walked to it through the common turnpike, then up the rocky steep, then along the greensward, and little by little they came into the presence of this revelation ; then they said, This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. The man who can chatter in the presence of the Jungfrau can have no heaven.

This is the very glory and the chief delight of religious study. It is so that we apply the thought in the Bible. It is always on the next page that the former vision is eclipsed. We are delighted with all the pages ; the first page gives us a creation, and we are pleased with the wonderful house in which we have to live ; but by-and-by the house becomes more luminous and beautiful and hospitable ; presently it is filled with love, and family life, and joy, and music ; and we are continually saying as we read the Bible, This is the page. Yet it is not the page for to-morrow ; the page for to-morrow is farther on, for all ages farther on. Never does there come a disappointment, but continually there burns or shines a hope which makes all realised joy seem small. If we had not the great hope we should be content with what we already hold in the hand ; it is the hope which seems to turn all possession into more or less of mockery and disappointment. It is also the same with providence. Providence enlarges itself every day into some new vision or apocalypse. It does not seem as if we could have a better day than the present ; yet when to-morrow comes we forget it as to its superior claim, and only remember it as a transient vision or stimulus by the way, thankful for it, yet it is to-day that brings into itself all things radiant and all things musical. God's

providence never ceases. God has not written one providential chapter once for all, and then left the world to study it: God rewrites his Bible in the events of every day. The record of the present time is not the record of man, though man may think so. God often guides the hand that drives the recording pen. When we look back upon great breadths of journalism, we come to see that through the whole there has passed one organic thought, or nerve, or purpose, and that there has been shaping where we thought there was nothing but inchoateness and chaos. So when all the journal is written up to the last, when the weary pen writes *Finis*, the journal will have quite a Bible look. This is the wonder of God: he cannot be found out unto perfection; he cannot be measured and set up in standard figure; he is more like the horizon; evidently there, yet where?—place without locality. Approach the horizon; it enlarges and recedes. A child thinks he can clutch the golden band that circles the mountains at eventide, and yet behold he is farther away than ever his dreams wandered; it is here, there, yonder, beyond: an eternal lure, an eternal illusion as to the mere handling and literal realisation.

What is the proper attitude or disposition of religious students? "We have waited for him." That is the right attitude. Waiting does not imply lethargy. He does not wait who lingers in a do-nothing and slothful condition. That is not waiting, that is idleness; that is not tarrying, that is practical blasphemy. Waiting implies energy, hope, restrained passion. The man who really waits really burns. Waiting is not incompatible with service; on the contrary, it implies service, it implies desire, expectation. The man who has a great expectancy does not look down; his face is not a blank, it is a burning, glowing symbol; the expectation is in him, it makes him glow. He cannot be impetuous, petulant, querulous, vehement, or demonstrative; but in proportion to the hope or promise that is in him is his zeal. If we were to measure our waiting by our lethargy, surely some of us wait well! We are princes in slothfulness; we take every prize ever offered for lethargy. Do not call that waiting or standing still. It is an inversion of every thought and purpose of God.

What is the great end of religious discipline? The text in forms us: "He will save us." These are words so short that a child might remember them. They are but four in number, yet they hold within their little limit everything that can be thought about sin, history, recovery, destiny. "He will save us." He will not disappoint our waiting, he will not satirise our manhood; he is not a God who has given us the aspiration of angels and then condemned us to the fate of dogs: it is not by such paradox that the loving God administers his universe. Judge of your destiny by your present personality as seen or witnessed in your aspiration, your passion, your desire, your capacity for service; judge of the possible future by your greatest hours of consciousness or realised power and personality. Somehow you have been so constituted as to pray; then you cannot have been so made as to be destroyed like dogs. Whether you can commit suicide is another question; we can close our eyes against the noontide, and declare from our point of view it is midnight; in making such a declaration we are keeping strictly to the line of personal fact at a given moment; yet we are not speaking the universal truth. Men should be careful how they degrade partial personal experiences into universal propositions. We must not misjudge God. If we have been capable of waiting for him, by that very capacity of patience we prove that God has been meaning all the time to come to us and to save us. Singing means more than mere utterance. God never meant the soul that can sing to him to vanish like an extinguished spark. Take thy singing as a pledge of thy possible immortality in blessed heaven; take all the little beginnings and germs of personality and power as pledges that God means harvest—golden infinite harvest. Why not reason yourselves upwards? Why this continual groping after the grave as if it were the only home you were destined to occupy? You might reason the other way, and be really glad of heart, and have great riches of grace and treasures of hope and confidence. How long will ye refuse to accept the whole benediction of God?

Here, then, we have our three words, and we should keep them as three precious jewels,—that God is a daily discovery to the religious consciousness, that is to say, he is always more and

more, clearer and clearer, nearer and nearer, tenderer and tenderer. Here is the attitude which the soul should maintain towards him—an attitude of waiting for him in the confidence that he will come; and here is the end for which all our religious consciousness should be cultivated—to be saved—not in some narrow, selfish, impoverished sense, but in the greatest sense: saved from despair, saved from moral degradation, saved from perdition, whatever that grim and awful word may mean; and not only saved from certain destinies, but saved into blessed inheritances and realisations, saved into manhood, into pureness, into virtue, into service, into liberty, into heaven. He does not preach the gospel who limits the word “salvation” to one act. Is there a greater word in human speech than this word salvation? He does mischief and not good who so speaks about salvation as to limit it to an aspect of selfish regard; on the other hand, he is the apostle of heaven who sees in salvation a new sphere of service, a new motive to action, a new pledge of immortality. We always use the word salvation with the word Christ. They were never meant to be dissociated. Christ did visibly come into the world of a certainty, but he was in the world spiritually from the foundation thereof. And he was only in the world thus incidentally because he was in the world before the world was created. Nor was he in existence simply as a Personality, a metaphysical Deity; he was in the creation as the Lamb slain, before a single line of stones had been laid as the foundation of the earth. We have often had occasion to say, and to rejoice in the saying, The atonement was rendered before the guilt was contracted. Here is a thought, then, of continually heightening sublimity. We do not exhaust God, we continually approach him; we cannot surpass him, he always leads our education, and heads our spiritual progress. We have read thus of the living God; we have said, This is God in judgment, he drowned the wide world, this is God; he burned Sodom and Gomorrah, this is God. Men are so prone to see God in terrible things—in pestilence, in famine, in sore distress, of family and nation. We then turn over into historic matter, and we say, This is God, ordering, shaping, leading all the movements of man, leading the blind by a way that they know not; lo, this is God! Then we go farther on, and come to the singing brethren, the

Dauids and the Asaphs of the ages, and as they touch their harps, and lift their trumpets to their lips, or breathe out psalm and song, we say in the church of music, This is God, and we have waited for him; this is the meaning of all government, of all history, music, song, rapture, gladness; this is our God, and we have waited for him. We pass on, and we come to the evangelists; we read their little condensation of history; we come to a place called Calvary; we see the uplifted Priest, we see the Agony, the Blood, the Dying, and we say, Lo, this is God; we have waited for him, and he will save us!

NOTE.

“Isaiah was not the first who attained to a knowledge of the personality of Messiah. Isaiah’s vocation was to render the knowledge of this personality clearer and more definite, and to render it more efficacious upon the souls of the elect, by giving it a greater individuality. The person of the Redeemer is mentioned even in Gen. xlix. 10: ‘The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a law-giver from between his feet, until Shiloh (*the tranquilliser*) come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be’ (i.e. *him shall the nations obey*). The personality of Messiah occurs also in several psalms which were written before the times of Isaiah; for instance, in the second and one hundred and tenth, by David; in the forty-fifth, by the sons of Korah; in the seventy-second, by Solomon. Isaiah has especially developed the perception of the prophetic and priestly office of the Redeemer, while in the earlier annunciations of the Messiah the royal office is more prominent; although in Psalm cx. the priestly office also is pointed out. Of the two states of Christ, Isaiah has expressly described that of the exinanition of the suffering Christ, while, before him, his state of glory was made more prominent. In the Psalms the inseparable connection between justice and suffering, from which the doctrine of a suffering Messiah necessarily results, is not expressly applied to the Messiah. We must not say that Isaiah first perceived that the Messiah was to suffer, but we must grant that this knowledge was in him more vivid than in any earlier writer; and that this knowledge was first shown by Isaiah to be an integral portion of Old Testament doctrine.”—KITTO’s *Cyclopædia of Biblical Literature*.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we come to the throne of grace, not of judgment, and there we may plead the blood that was shed for sin, and by the mighty mystery of the Cross, and all its gracious truth and meaning, we may enter into the mystery of pardon and into the joy of peace with God; therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We know the reality of the faith by the depth of the peace. This is the gift of God; this is the portion of those who have in them the Spirit of eternal life; this is their sign and their proof and their testimony. So, looking upon the calm of the soul, they live without fear, and they contemplate death in the spirit of victory. We bless thee for thy Word—beginning far away, taking our thoughts back to beginnings and suggestions, and from the Genesis of thy revelation conducting our thought onward and upward to the glorious Apocalypse. May we walk steadily all the way, marvelling at thy wonderful power, and adoring thy wisdom and thy grace; recognising thy sovereignty, and watching the continual and gracious unfoldment of thy high purpose. Thus shall the word of Christ dwell in us richly; we shall receive nutrition from heaven, and in the strength derived from the Bread of Life we shall go on from day to day, until being disembodied, and having no longer this weary tabernacle of the flesh, we shall enter into the joy of perfect spiritual worship, seeing God by the pureness of our heart, and worshipping him with all the faculties he has redeemed and sanctified. Comfort those who are dejected; give a word of counsel and inspiration to any whose thoughts are bewildered. Lead the blind by a way that they know not. Take out of to-morrow the cloud, or the sting, or the fear which makes men dread the dawn; and by giving us peace with God we shall also have given unto us peace with men, and we shall begin to pray where we expected to die. The Lord work this miracle for us in the name and grace of God the Son; then in the wilderness we shall have a garden, and in the place of the hot sand a fountain of living water. Amen.

Chapter xxvi.

THE GREAT SONG.

THERE are some songs which cannot be kept to any land. They speak the universal language of human experience and human need, and therefore they are at home everywhere. There may be local tunes, which no one cares to transplant from

the place of their origin ; but there are other tunes that will cross the sea with you, and haunt the house where you live, and fall in with all the best excitements and holiest aspirations and most joyous movements of the soul. What suits the land of Judah suits all other lands, wherein it speaks of righteousness, salvation, truth, peace, goodness, uprightness—the moral qualities that no weather can stain, and whose use and benediction no custom can stale. World-songs should be sung by the whole world. Who can sing Hebrew ? The very language is itself music ; there is about it the fatness of a full-grown grape, the colour of wine in which there is no death, the juice on which the soul lives. When Hebrew is set to music it is the music itself set to music ; and then we need all the universe for an orchestra, and all living things for singers and accompanists. This chapter is as a chapter of delights. It is in very deed a chapter to revel in. Who would not linger in Paradise ? There seems to be no farewell in a summer day, no abruptness of adieu ; we seem to part from one another as a man might enter into the sweet custody of sleep.

Here the prophet becomes a psalmist, supplying both the words and the music ; and so ecstatic is he that he writes a chapter in the New Testament before the time. Men are surprised when they find flowers in unexpected places. Had they found them in their own locality, at their own season, little or no heed would have been paid to them, but to find them out of place and out of time, what a surprise is even the simplest flower ! Isaiah often antedates the New Testament. He writes the New Testament in Hebrew, and therefore makes it in its expression a nobler testament. We might live farther ahead if we could pray better. It is inspiration that obliterates intervening days, and seizes upon millennial lights and comforts and securities. We are dull scholars, plodders in the inky letter. If we have wings we do not use them ; at best we flutter where we ought to fly. The Church by this time might have been on the mountain-top, and all nations flowing to it ; only we have made it a parochial building, and guarded it well with gilded palings. Spirit of the living God, bless us with largeness of soul ! What a vision is this ! The prophet sees a spiritual city—no bricks, no stones, no wood or

iron; salvation for walls and bulwarks. Living stones make a living temple. All that we now have of architectural outline and shape ought to be considered but as a hint. What can men do with stones? Who can turn cold clay, though burned and cooled again, into poetry? Yet even this miracle has been half done in some cases. The Lord permits it to be done, that by such little helps we may get ideas of larger things,—that through a one-paned window we may catch a glimpse of the horizon. The mischief is that we will rest in the little, the alphabetic, the initial, and will not urge on to claim the thing that is signified. We carry with us the little warranty, but we never go to claim the estate. There is a Church within the church and beyond the church—understanding by that second term the visible communion so described, or the building erected of stone, well plastered and highly coloured—that is not the Church. What salvation is there in the world? what sense of divine communion? what identity with God? what confidence that time and space are only stumbling-blocks, and the real city is a city of fellowship with infinite ideas and purposes, infinite love and truth? Who is there that does not leave early Sacrament to talk about the coldness of the morning? So contradictory may men be, and superbly foolish, that they can open their eyes from looking upon God to remark upon the phenomena of space! We need the spirit of transport, the spirit that lifts itself into third heavens, and asks, Are there no higher heights; are there no seventh heavens? In such rapture we see most of the spiritual universe. We are only critics, not rhapsodists. The poet is the man we want, because he speaks ultimate truths; he puts into a line a whole revelation, he wraps up in a sentence all the births of the ages, forgetting the pang and throe and misery in the holy issue. But who can be in the spirit and in the body at the same time? Who can see salvation as a temple and praises as a cathedral whilst he is victimised and laughed at by his own five senses? We need prophets, therefore, who have the seeing eyes—the eyes that see what to others is invisible; and they must put up with our impertinence and rudeness for a time; they can bear it, for our ingratitude hardly reaches them; they have flung their music upon the world, and vanished from the world's vengeance and anger. Blessed be God, the prophets are out of the way, but the

prophecies are still here, singing, and beyond the dart that would slay the singer.

We are called upon to "Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in" (ver. 2)—literally, *truths*. The Hebrew is averse to made-up emphasis and made-up pluralities, but sometimes it will allow that there may be more than one, so that the one may be for convenience' sake broken up into sections and parts that the entire may be grasped the more perfectly. "Truths,"—that is, all aspects of truthfulness in the heart and life. The diamond consents, as it were, to be cut into facets. It was not so found, but it will submit itself to chisel or wheel or sharp instrument to be made into little facets, each bright as an angel, each flashing like a morning undreamed of for brightness, each part of the whole. Yet who fixes upon one facet and says, This is the diamond? We need all the parts to constitute the integrity. But who can grasp all the parts? No one man. How then is it to be done? By the whole Church. Can one minister be all ministers? No: he is but a facet; he is but an aspect: we must gather together all God's ministries—of eloquence, and insight, and power, and sympathy, and poetry, and criticism, and constitute them into one ministry, and call it God's. So it is with truth. We gather truths; we proceed from the plural to the singular, and then come away from the singular into the plural, and find that all the while there is but one truth as there is but one God.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee (ver. 3).

This is the issue of all discipline. What is meant by "perfect peace"? This is all the poor English can do. The English language lives on adjectives, loves them, cannot do without them, ekes and pieces itself out by them. What can we set beside the word "peace" that is worthy of it? The Hebrew sets nothing; we have set the word "perfect." It would read thus literally: "Thou establishest a purpose firm; peace, peace, for in thee is his trust." How, then, is emphasis obtained? Often in the Hebrew by iteration. There is an emphasis of repetition.

Instead of saying "perfect peace," that tongue would say, "peace, peace." The adjective comes by reduplication. Who could make an adjective worthy of such a noun? Let us beware of all qualifying terms which describe and limit spiritual life. The danger is that we may find our resting-place in the adjective, and never get into the substantive at all. How words are qualified, how ~~lives~~ lives are minimised, how truth is debased, by words of qualification; how grand are simple terms; who cares to talk about a "bright" sun? The sun seems the brighter by omitting all complimentary epithets. To be the sun is to be bright; to have peace is to have perfect peace. This is the sublimity of faith. The end of discipline is not to make men critical, facetious, pedantic, pharisaic, self-sufficient; the end of all life-discipline is to make men complete, and completeness is peace. Where there is want of peace there is want of completeness. Light a candle, sweep the house, search diligently for that which is lost; it may be only as one in ten, but the element that is lost must be found and supplied: the universe knows the meaning of equipoise, balance, rhythm, music. "Peace, peace,"—as it were, an accumulation of peace. "Great peace have they which love thy law." Oh that we had hearkened unto thy commandments! then had our peace flowed like a river. "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked." Nor is this all poetry. Again and again under the poetry we find solid reason; we find under the blooming flowers solid rocks hardly yielding to gunpowder.

"Trust ye in the Lord for ever" (ver. 4). Why? "For in the LORD JEHOVAH"—a rare combination of words; probably characteristic of this prophet—"for in the LORD JEHOVAH"—as it were, the twice God—"is everlasting strength." But "everlasting strength" is an English repetition that weakens itself by its very endeavour to be emphatic. What is the literal word for "everlasting strength"? The literal rendering might be "Rock of Ages"—"for the Lord Jehovah is the Rock of Ages." We need the Rock. There are times when we distinguish, broadly and vitally, between the rock and the sand; there are other times when we are so victimised and misled that we think the sand will do, and in our frivolity and impious levity we say, This

is enough for me. Then we tell lies to ourselves. There is nothing sufficient for man but God. Temporarily there may be some feasts that satisfy the passing appetite, but the real hunger cries out for the Infinite. It is wonderful what man can do with. What a banquet he can take! When he is alive through and through, when every faculty is awake, when every capacity is astir, when the whole nature sharpens itself into a cry for nutriment, nothing can meet the infinite appetite but the infinite God. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." The word "strength" comes happily into the language of the Christian life. There are times when we are peculiarly conscious of needing strength. When the strong man enters the sick-room he seems to bring healing with him. He is as a mountain with fresh air blowing around its crowded heights. Necessity looks up to him and says, Bless you, in the name of God: we have been waiting for you, for we are all so weak in this house: now we feel strong in your strength; you can lift the sufferer, you can bring to us what we need; our poor dying frailty gives its life up to you, strong soul; now take the reins, rule us with beneficent power. So the soul sometimes needs the aspect of strength in God, to feel the sufficiency of the Rock of Ages. There are times when, so to say, we put our foot out to feel if we are on solid ground, saying in effect, Is this rock, or bog? Is this granite, or swamp? Thus we are comforted in proportion as we are assured of real, living, eternal strength; and we sing:—

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee."

These are the most sacred experiences of the soul; they admit rather of reference than of elaboration; we must live them to know them. Even the fool should be quiet here, for he knows not on what sensitiveness he treads when he ventures to open his uncircumcised lips.

What sublime religious aspiration we have here!

"With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness" (ver. 9).

The soul often cries out for the living God. "As the hart

panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." These moments of elevation make all other moments sacred. After great prayer comes great business—if not great in the sense of arithmetical progress, yet great in the sense of moral satisfaction. How sweet the bread that is honestly won! It needs no adjective; it is better as simple "bread." If the adjective come into it at all, it will be at the other end, not as an introductory term, but as one explanatory; then we shall speak of "bread of heaven," "bread of life": the bread will stand first, and if it stoop to accept the qualification, it will only be as the sea sometimes stoops to have a little crest of foam upon its infinite billows. Are we conscious of such soul rapture? Have we sometimes to come a long way in order to get back to earth again? and when we look at men do we look as those who are coming out of a sleep, opening their eyes in half-stupor, half-wonder, because they have been so far away in other lands where the light is sevenfold, and where they have seen God face to face? Beware of a critical piety, a lexicon theology, a faith that admits of being transferred into words, and that boasts itself of a kind of correlation of forces, as if it could go into words, and then come back again into itself; whereas there are no words that can hold all the soul knows, any more than there are vessels made by human hands which can hold all the rain of heaven.

On the other hand, we may well be cautioned against a rapture that does not afterwards vindicate itself by practical piety. Who can get through his hymn without one shadow in it? Isaiah could not; he said:—

"Let favour be showed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord" (ver. 10).

All is lost upon him. Let the summer-day rain all its gathered clouds upon the sand of the desert, and it will not make a garden of it; all the rich rain will be swallowed by the burning lips, and at eventide the desert shall thirst as with the thirst of fire: otherwise, the world would be converted to-day, and would have been converted at the very time of the revelation of the Son of man. If Providence could have converted the world, the world

would to-day have been in the attitude of prayer. But goodness is lost, as rain is lost. We ourselves have often wasted the sunshine. We had the whole broad, white, glistening day to work in, and instead of regarding it as an opportunity for service we complained of the heat, and sank under the burden as men oppressed. We say that some men never can be satisfied. There is a painful truth in that statement. The music does not satisfy them, nor does the appeal, nor the exposition, nor the prayer, nor the service of friendship, nor the sacrifice of love; they still ask for the impossible. Knowing what this is in common life we may know what it is in the higher ranges of experience. The spirit of discontentment is in some men, and do what you will for them you find no flowers in their conduct, no fruit upon their life-tree, nothing but leaves, and the leaves half-grown, 'as if ashamed to be seen upon branches so unfruitful, so unblest. Doth not the goodness of God lead thee to repentance? Think of it! health, and children, and love, and prosperity, and social honour, and all these a staircase leading thee—no where! All these marble steps should conduct thee to heaven. But as soon as the earthquake ceases men begin again to curse and swear, and as soon as the earth is felt to have recovered from her vibrations men go back to the tavern and drink themselves to death; when the heavy thunder ceases, and the vivid lightning withdraws itself, men come from the sanctuary of the cellar to repeat their brutalities in their higher chambers. "In the land of uprightness the wicked will deal unjustly." You cannot make him pious in the sanctuary. If he fold his hands in prayer as his mother bade him, his soul is not in any attitude of supplication. He could plot murder at the altar; he could plan the slaughter of an enemy during the singing of a hymn.

So the prophet's grand psalm rolls on. He confesses indeed:—

"O Lord our God, other lords beside thee have had dominion over us: but by thee only will we make mention of thy name" (ver. 13).

We may all acknowledge that lordships have ruled us of which we are now ashamed. Yet there seems to be a kind of unspeakable necessity of our passing through these lordships, these minor and inferior dominions. We cannot begin where

our fathers ended. The philosopher dies, he leaves his pen-and-ink to his son, but not a single intellectual faculty or acquired attainment in reading and thought. The greatest, wisest man dies, and is obliged to tell his child to mind his lesson well, to take pains in learning the alphabet ! We have all to fight the same lions, tread the same road, try the same gates, fall by the same difficulties. Such is the mystery of this disciplinary life ! Blessed are they who can speak of other lordships in the past tense, in a tense that is completed, saying, Other lordships have had dominion over us, but the lordships and their rulings have vanished and ended, and now we stand in the empire of God, and own no crown, or throne, or sceptre but the Father's. Discipline is not lost when it ends in that grand loyalty.

Who can touch the next point in the prophet's psalm ? He says :—

“Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust : for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead ” (ver. 19).

Isaiah may not have known what he was talking about. A man is not the less wise if he cannot be his own interpreter. There are moments when men are simply mediums through which God speaks ; they are the fragment on which the infinite silence breaks into the spray of speech. They cannot tell all that God is saying through them or by them ; they wist not what they say. Let us allow all this, and yet here is a most remarkable prognostication of what may well be called the supreme doctrine of Christianity—the resurrection of the dead. “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.” “If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.” The whole fabric of Christianity would seem to stand on the cornerstone of the resurrection. Into that subject we cannot here enter at length, but how beautifully inspiring it is to find even thus early in the sacred record a groping after immortality !

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